FIELD

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RANDALL JARRELL

A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

RANDALL JARRELL: A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

It is as we come back and come back to a poet's poems that we discover their staying power. Randall Jarrell's best poems, obscured at first by the glamor of his flashier contemporaries — Delmore Schwartz, Robert Lowell, John Berryman — are demonstrating that kind of power. Intrigued by American poets who used a plain style — Whitman, Williams, Frost — Jarrell gradually found a way to shape poems of remarkable expressiveness out of drab or unlikely materials. Other poets, as this symposium demonstrates, have learned to listen to those poems with respectful attention and profound delight.

It seems heroic of Jarrell to have tried to stay in touch with his childhood freshness and sense of wonder while at the same time working harder than most to confront and assimilate the meaning of World War Two, including the Nazi holocaust. If the effort was incredibly costly — some would say it destroyed, or helped destroy, him — it also produced the range and tension of his poetry and his fruitful love affair with German culture: its music, its poetry, its psychology and its fairy tales.

A few years ago we might have said that Jarrell was an enigma. Now we may be more content to stress his uniqueness. He isn't like anybody else. Don't we tend first to resist that in our poets, then grudgingly acquiesce in it, then celebrate it?

Our thanks to Mary Jarrell, for the photograph and for many helpful suggestions.

THE BAD MUSIC

I sit, sit listening; my lashes droop
And the years come close around me like a crowd
Of the strangers I knew once; and they say nothing,
And I see at last that they were never mine.
The breast opening for me, the breaths gasped
From the mouth pressed helplessly against my wrist
Were lies you too believed; but what you wanted
And possessed was, really, nothing but yourself:
A joy private as a grave, the song of death.

. . . These are lies, too? I sit here like a fool
And think half-tenderly, as my lips curve:
What do you know? How can you say it?
You were something, you loved something —
And where have they gone? What are you now?
There is no answer. I don't cry now,
So I don't cry; and I don't laugh —
What's happening to all of us is in its way
Laughable — why don't I laugh? Why don't we laugh?

It's bad music; but it's what we hear. . . .
It's night here; outside my big windows
The students come home from carolling, the candles
Wink out and on and out, like mixed-up stars.
I sit here like a mixed-up star:
Where can I shine? What use is it to shine?
I say; and see, all the miles north inside my head,
You looking down across the city, puzzling.
You always cried. And now are you trying

Instead, to be lucky? To be happy, really,
Where your small light is seen and shining
High over the millions who breathe and wait and sparkle

With the rain's globes, the worlds that roll like laughs
To the dark stream and its immediate sea?
Of those millions how many know or love at all
You, Anna? A few; so few. Enough.
This world holds more than we can see or say,
And it stuffs us like a goose before it kills us.

Laura Jensen

POTENTIAL FOR WHOLE TOTEM

The vanity plate read MY GUY, in the back window a hollow flocked dog and a placard declaring I WILL NEVER GROW UP, in the side window rocking on a spring a foot that reads I'M A SONICS FAN. As I looked down from the bus window I told myself I had been confronted with too ridiculous a sight, now I could never understand Randall Jarrell, because the question I kept asking myself was, "Why does Randall Jarrell have such an unendingly serious world view?" It is not a rhetorical stance, it is too complete and convincing. It is also forgiving: through Jarrell's eyes I began to see the car decorations differently — the driver thinks the news is like a feather inside doing brain surgery, or the rat race makes her long to display madness, or she feels a car cannot be made more ridiculous than it is in fact — too much motor and metal and glass to drive one person to work, a person who needs a quiet place with trees and grass.

In Jarrell's letters another side of the man emerges, humorous and playful. Jarrell might have been delighted with the car, he shared the car enthusiasm and might have used a vanity plate himself. (He owned a Mercedes vacuum cleaner for his car — so maybe EUREKA.) He wrote a novel he called a comedy. He acted the lively and delighted man who loved to joke, whose conversations with friends could make him inebriated with happiness.

But Louise Bogan reviewed his work as solemn. In a 1952 *New Yorker*, she considers four books which "illustrate the methods . . . by which the modern imagination tries to project feelings of mystery and awe." She calls the books Gothic and Jarrell's characters "too young to have known life or too baffled to act. These creatures revolve in a limbo of pain and fear."[1] Jarrell saw poetry as the sphere for truths from many frames of reference, truths which could be dreadful because human life has winter, death, and visits with the afterlife — and life is always within the context of life-and-death matters.

1. Louise Bogan, "Verse," review of *The Seven League Crutches*, *The New Yorker* (16 Feb. 1952): 107-08.

In an essay on criticism Jarrell wrote: "Everyone speaks of the negative capability of the artist, of his ability to lose what self he has in the many selves, the great self of the world. Such a quality is, surely, the first that a critic should have; yet who speaks of the negative capability of the critic? how often are we able to observe it?"[2] In asking for negative capability he opens the door for truth which can be difficult and for devoting the energy and concentration of poetry to essays and criticism. And according to his letters, Jarrell's treatment of critics, especially his own, could be biting; so could his criticism of others.

I found I had not known Jarrell after studying his poems at the University of Iowa, but my education was far less rote than writing. I knew his name as I knew shrubs in my vocabulary; a shrub I might recognize if the leaf or flower was obvious. I would recognize some Jarrell poems. I read through the *Collected Poems* for words that explained or defined the serious world view, and found these in "The Bad Music."

Understanding "The Bad Music" might require some knowledge of Jarrell's life. Anna is Jarrell's mother, but is the description in stanza one Anna nurturing the child or someone else? After her divorce, Jarrell and his brother and mother visited his grandmother, whom he called Mama; he called his great-grandmother Dandeen. "The Bad Music" was written before 1940, probably during the time he was suffering a disappointment in love, and was included in his first book *Blood for a Stranger*. In the poem a young poet approaches uncertainty and doubt, determined that there will be transcendence.

I see Jarrell saying I am a fool, embarrassed, a goose. "What's happening to all of us is in its way/ Laughable — why don't I laugh?" "I sit here like a mixed-up star." Has Jarrell seemed to himself for a moment as incongruous to his world view as the car of my first paragraph — ridiculous and pointless?

But Jarrell finds his potentially laughable situation to be universal and his spirit and forgiveness include himself. The ambi-

2. Randall Jarrell, "Poets, Critics, and Readers," in his *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), pp. 98-99.

guity at the sixth line of the last stanza increases the encompassing universality. Anna comes to represent a great deal — all of those who told Jarrell he was loved, and Jarrell himself, and all the young who live their foolish lives as statesmen indulge in rhetoric, as Hitler marches through Europe. His world view remains real — "goose" does not stay a word meaning in slang a fool. The goose is in real pain as it is being stuffed for pate, and it is also a real goose, with a potential for the full totem of the free wild goose — beautiful. All beings in Jarrell's world maintain an intrinsic potential for full totem — whole owl, whole bat, whole goose, whole human being.

Jarrell declares an expansive freedom which flowers in the later poems that expand into narrative. "This world holds more than we can see or say." When Jarrell sees with delight and detail a nose like three strawberries, a lion once an MGM movie star, these have comic potential, but are never only comic. They are wonderful. Their forces explain that they are made of the metal of the gods, too beautiful or threatened in potential to be comic.

During the precarious McCarthy era, throughout the 1950s, Jarrell poured out creative work, especially essays and criticism, and he was influential in his teaching and positions of responsibility. Early in the 50s his essay defining a class — "The Intellectual in America" — won him substantial praise. Despite a question raised about his background by a committee, which he answered with a letter, he was appointed Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress in 1956. He can be called formative in the poetry we know today.

In a review Beth Bentley writes of Jarrell, "He was in some sense androgynous. His sympathy and identification with women are striking."[3] Many of his poems were written in the persona of a woman. For instance, in "The Woman at the Washington Zoo," the woman may long for release from her caged life, but it is important that she is caged in her human life, and only happens to be a woman, that Jarrell is free to use a woman or a man as a

3. Beth Bentley, "The Feminine Mystique in Randall Jarrell's Poetry," review of *The Lost World*, *Northwest Review of Books* (Spring 1986): 22.

persona. Jarrell was loved by women, and maintained long friendships with both men and women. If androgyny's definition includes causes, if Jarrell's fate was formed by women, he seems to have developed this to a symbiotic structure, to have reached a success in nature that includes the ideal of mutual benefits. Jarrell's work may have helped some women see themselves and accept themselves through his writing and acceptance, allowed them to enter the world of the 60s and 70s determined and taught.

Was I in some ways one of these? Jarrell became depressed in 1965 because of illness and other reasons; in spring he attempted suicide, one act in a life of creativity. In autumn, at a hospital for treatments to his hand, he was walking by a roadside and struck by a car and killed. This was found to be an accidental death. I found myself wishing I could read Jarrell's response to the popular movements of the late 60s, and to the 70s. But his work has taught me some things. The spine of my paperback suggests I read Jarrell carefully, but I found only one note — "The Chicago Art Institute" at the end of "A Ghost, A Real Ghost." This returned me to an unpublished poem from my Iowa thesis. The poem was about something I remembered as seeing in the Art Institute in a Hogan exhibit. The poem's character returned in a long story or novella I wrote a few years later. The lines from Jarrell had defined for me what I had seen:

> — Am I dead? A ghost, a real ghost
> Has no need to die: what is he except
> A being without access to the universe
> That he has not yet managed to forget?

Jarrell has guided my vision and helped me define myself. To rephrase Bogan's words, we were too young to have known life as students, even today we can be too baffled to act. But Jarrell's world view sees us and knows lives are wonderful, have potential for the full human totem.

THE DEATH OF THE BALL TURRET GUNNER

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Bruce Weigl

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF NIGHTMARE

"The abnormal is not courage . . ." Jack Gilbert

Among the many fine critical responses to what is arguably one of Jarrell's best and most widely recognized poems there is a predominantly common thread in the form of a strict metaphorical exegesis of the poem. Most significantly these metaphors are seen in the fetus-like description of the gunner trapped in the womb-gloom of his turret, and in the poem's coldly distanced and impersonal final line in which the fetus/gunner is washed out or aborted from the turret/womb by a steam hose. It's clear that Jarrell himself had at least one of these metaphors in mind. In an extensive note on the poem included in *The Complete Poems*, the poet wrote that "hunched upside-down in his little sphere, he [the gunner] looked like the foetus in the womb." In addition to these specific metaphors, there occurs throughout the poem a great deal of highly suggestive, allusive, and even ambiguous imagery which leads naturally to a figurative reading. Although any fair and careful consideration of the poem must surely address itself to these insistent metaphorical tendencies, the poem is most powerfully felt when the reader pursues its literal layer as well. Indeed, Jarrell is careful to point the reader in that direction when he writes in the same note that "a ball turret was a plexiglass sphere set into the belly of a B-17 or B-24, and inhabited by two .50 caliber machine-guns and one man, a short small man. . . . The fighters which attacked him were armed with cannon firing explosive shells. The hose was a steam hose," thus emphasizing the importance of our literal appreciation and understanding of the poem. However adroitly we may argue for the metaphors' significance, especially for the way they provide a manageable form for this particularly horrible experience, even the most powerful metaphors pale in the face of the layer of literal consciousness upon which the figurative structure is constructed. One is reminded here of Neruda's "the blood of the children ran in the streets like the blood of children. . . ."

Through an intense compression of language (the poem is only five lines long, roughly five beats per line depending on your scansion), and a powerfully ironic understatement, the gunner is figuratively born into his death. Yet what should and does resonate long after we've put the poem down is the literalness of the almost completely unadorned presentation of that death, what Douglas Dunn has called "the indignation of acceptance."

With this poem and with other, similar war poems Jarrell echoes Wilfred Owen's regard for soldiers as objects of our pity, and, in spite of the so-called popularity of his war, Jarrell also reveals the empty and mocking offices of patriotism as well. The speaker, a dead man, is alive enough to speak to us of his death but too dead in spirit to evoke anything more than a stripped-down version of his brief existence and his eventual confrontation with the "black flak" of life. Like the speakers of Jarrell's "Losses" and "Eighth Air Force," the gunner stands as a symbol for combat's relentless squashing of innocence.

The poem's first line precisely sets the post-lapsarian point of view: there has been a fall from grace, a descent from the idyllic peace and safety of "mother's sleep" into the cold arms of the State. The gunner is of course a grown man at least of the age for conscription, but in terms of understanding just what exactly the State has in mind for him, he is an innocent and naive recruit, a newborn. The State replaces the mother in line two in one of many skillful and dramatic transformations which Jarrell manages through a precise telescoping of time. Once within the State, which becomes more specifically the turret, the gunner assumes a fetal position necessitated by the close-quartered design of the turret. From this position the speaker presents himself as a kind of *ur*-man whose "wet fur froze," a primal being dehumanized by the demands of warfare. When the gunner wakes to the brutal realities of war he no longer resembles the boy who fell from his mother's sleep. This waking does in fact represent one of two murders in the poem: first the *boy* is murdered through the exact dismantling of his innocence, and then the *man* is murdered by the exploding cannon fire. But what al-

lows this *ur*-man metaphor to exist at all is the literal reality of the gunner in his Army Air Force issue fur-lined jacket, his perspiration freezing in the cold air of 35,000 feet.

Line three sweeps us away from the earth's dream of life to the vacuum-like and emotionless world "six miles" above. So much happens so quickly here that the patient and passionate reader may suffer the same disembodiment of spirit as the gunner. The earth has been torn loose from his feet and he is suspended in an ironic reversal of the apollonian perspective, forced to hover above his life so that he may now see it as it actually is: only a dream. Once removed from the physical constraints of earth, the gunner realizes too late the lie of the State's promise of an after-life. The irony of the poem's sleep imagery is also most fully realized in line three, when we come to see that life for the gunner was and is only a fiction, a fantasy, and that the only reality he will ever know is death in the form of the "nightmare fighters." Between this line and line four there occurs another of the poem's transformations: in this case the gunner's waking becomes the dark vision of the enemy coldly poised for the kill.

Line four is perhaps the most direct and unadorned line of the poem, qualities which emphasize the irrevocable and inevitable fate of boys in combat, including those who physically "survive," and the literalness of the line, the plainly presented *said* quality offers no escape from the huge facts which loom up and dominate in the form of those strangely superior fighters. As in the Greek way, all critical action with regard to the gunner's actual death happens off stage. In the brief moment between lines four and five the exploding shells have reduced the gunner to something that now must be washed out of the turret with a steam hose. The final line, like the previous one, is flat and unequivocal. Because the gunner (like the fetus) has never been allowed to fully achieve an independent life, moving as he did from one womb to another, his observations of even his own horrible death read more like reportage than lyric poetry. Though this ghost may speak a literal truth: "When I died they washed me out

of the turret with a hose," because he has been robbed of his innocence he is no longer able to render an imaginative and therefore a hopeful or redeeming vision of the world which had only provided a "dream of life" in the first place. What this final line most significantly reveals, however, is that the poem's essential form takes the shape of an inevitable movement through a series of unconscious conflicts which can never be resolved, only repeated again and again, and the gunner's death is reduced to one more grim statistic of war, hopelessly announcing itself.

CD Wright

MISSION OF THE SURVIVING GUNNER

Death is not my subject. And it is among the balder assertions of French feminist Christine Rochfort that while literature has no sex, death is a specifically male obsession. She has a point. However, having once taken a bed in death's adjoining room and moved around among its furnishings after the room was absented, I do not view it, even on nightly news, as an abstraction. Of those inexorable endings to dread, the most dreadful to me, most aberrant, if you will, are the violent, especially those institutionally directed, namely — capital punishment and warfare. Thus in war poem heaped upon war poem, beginning with " . . . The Ball Turret Gunner" and never again with such dexterous compression and plain eloquence, Jarrell blames the villainy of the world not on Germans (whose literature he would wholly adopt), nor on Japanese, but on the one neutrally destructive force, the State.

Yet Jarrell's war poems are not politically resolute. He was not a pacifist, after all, but a participant. Too much the poet to be a patriot. Too much of a traditionalist, a Southerner, to resist. To avoid killing when the State gives the order is a rebellious act, a punishing but also a stirringly lonely act. Something in the make-up of Stafford and Lowell, born the same year as he, that was not in Jarrell's. And the world was far and gone for romanticism. Jarrell's entry into the war, as into poetry, would be on the side of realism. Because the experience of war had been pivotal his mission would become that of the survivor. It was to express what he felt, which could touch a chord in any civilian or combatant who survived, being so close to what others felt. A war, even one widely perceived as just, even given our tremendous capacity to absorb our destructability, alters the old borders of the self more surely than those of nations, which are not after all living organisms. In the poem "Terms" the amputated pensioner " . . . looks at the leaf, as he looks at things/ With mixed feelings — / And says, 'I've changed.' " Part of his mission then was to impress upon us that we could not and would not be the same

once we have tasted our own blood. No less haunting than killing is outliving. Jarrell took the charge upon himself — talking through, on behalf of, and directly to the inarticulate, the fallen: "You are something there are millions of. . . ./ Surely your one theory, to live/ Is nonsense to the practice of the centuries./ What is demanded in the trade of States/ But lives, your lives? — the one commodity" (from "The Sick Nought").

I am in rare agreement with Robert Bly when he prefaced *Forty Poems Touching On Recent American History* saying " . . . the poet's main job is to penetrate that husk around the American psyche, and since that psyche is inside *him** too, the writing of political poetry is like the writing of personal poetry, a sudden drive by the poet inward. . . . Once inside the psyche he can speak of inward and political things with the same assurance." Jarrell resolves nothing, but in five virtually monosyllabic lines he does conclude this much: we are of the earth's issue, woman born, delivered onto death by the indifferent instruments of the State. In "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" the metaphor is that conclusive, that exacting: from his mother's sleep, the gunner falls — whether from her anesthecized birthing or post-partum drift — their separation is involuntary. The newborn seeks shelter in the belly of the beast. His wet lanugo transformed to furlined flight gear — which freezes to him. The beast becomes the State, and the hostile womb it creates a B-24. Suspended upside down in his plexiglass sac his animate darkness is shattered by the perpetually inanimate dark. In the final line, with a rhetorical gesture clearly derivative of Wilfred Owen, the poet shifts the bomber's voice from a limited first to the omniscient first, thus commanding the grisly perspective of the newly-born dead, who watches the womb evacuated of his own remains.

"I feel just like an Angel," Jarrell was quoted as saying astride a pair of skis before he ever brought the mercy of his vision to bear on the onus of war. And "May I die on the day the world ends" prays an old woman on a bus, a providential passenger in one of his last poems, re-positing his one theory — to live.

* pronoun and emphasis Bly's

MOVING

Some of the sky is grey and some of it is white.
The leaves have lost their heads
And are dancing round the tree in circles, dead;
The cat is in it.
A smeared, banged, tow-headed
Girl in a flowered, flour-sack print
Sniffles and holds up her last bite
Of bread and butter and brown sugar to the wind.

Butter the cat's paws
And bread the wind. We are moving.
I shall never again sing
Good morning, Dear Teacher, to my own dear teacher.
Never again
Will Augusta be the capital of Maine.
The dew has rusted the catch of the strap of my satchel
And the sun has fallen from the place where it was chained
With a blue construction-paper chain. . . .
Someone else must draw the bow
And the blunderbuss, the great gobbler
Upside-down under the stone arrow
In the black, bell-brimmed hat —
And the cattycornered bat.
The witch on the blackboard
Says: "Put the Plough into the Wagon
Before it turns into a Bear and sleeps all winter
In your play-house under the catalpa."
Never again will Orion
Fall on my speller through the star
Taped on the broken window by my cot.
My knee is ridged like corn
And the scab peels off it.

We are going to live in a new pumpkin
Under a gold star.

There is not much else.
The wind blows somewhere else.
The brass bed bobs to the van.
The broody hen
Squawks upside-down — her eggs are boiled;
The cat is dragged from the limb.
The little girl
Looks over the shoulders of the moving-men
At her own street;
And, yard by lot, it changes.
Never again.
But she feels her tea-set with her elbow
And inches closer to her mother;
Then she shuts her eyes, and sits there, and squashed red
Circles and leaves like colored chalk
Come on in her dark head
And are darkened, and float farther
And farther and farther from the stretched-out hands
That float out from her in her broody trance:
She hears her own heart and her cat's heart beating.

She holds the cat so close to her he pants.

Fred Chappell

THE LONGING TO BELONG

It is the dread question the interviewer never fails to ask: "Why did you become a writer?" The author sweats and stammers. He doesn't know why he became a writer. If he knew that he would know perhaps more than is good for him, certainly more than is good for his work.

But the novelist Jose Luis Donoso has a telling answer. Why is he a writer? "Because," he says, "I wasn't invited to the party."

His explanation is incomplete, of course, but it is neat, lacks self-aggrandizement, and encapsulates much of the theme of *Tonio Kröger*. And it points up the fact that the sense of detachment, even of alienation, which is indispensable for a writer is often established in childhood and that the memory of this alienation may remain powerful throughout a long literary career.

The child as outsider is an important theme in the poetry of Randall Jarrell, one that he returns to again and again. In fact, when we number those stages or conditions of our lives when we haplessly find ourselves social outsiders — as travelers, as invalids, as students or soldiers or refugees or elderly — we can note that Jarrell has treated of most of them with fine sensitivity. While some writers have welcomed and celebrated their status as outsiders — Shelley, for example, and Lermontov and Poe and Rimbaud — Jarrell has emphasized instead the loneliness and bewilderment and the feeling of abandonment.

There is in Jarrell's poetry the longing to belong to some settled, established, and humane order of existence. There is at the same time a painful recognition that this sort of order does not, and probably cannot, exist in the world that we know. Yet still it ought to exist somewhere; it is a necessary Ideal, just beyond the fringe of the terrible Actual.

Jarrell would like to posit childhood as one part of this ideal order. He would like to describe childhood in the words with which Hölderlin describes it in his novel, *Hyperion*:

> Yes, divine is the being of the child, so long as it has not been dipped in the chameleon colors of men.

> The child is wholly what it is, and that is why it is so beautiful.
>
> The pressure of Law and Fate touches it not; only in the child is freedom.
>
> In the child is peace; it has not yet come to be at odds with itself. Wealth is in the child; it knows not its heart nor the inadequacy of life. It is immortal, for it has not heard of death.

He would like to think of childhood in these terms, but he cannot do so. Children in the twentieth century are familiarly conversant with death, and they are a long way from being immortal, and Jarrell dramatizes the true state of things in poems like "Protocols," "The State," and "The Truth." In "Come to the Stone . . ." the war victim child has imagined his epitaph: *"Come to the stone and tell me why I died."* But no one can give him any better answer than his own terrified earlier question which he has formulated in a child's terms of the consequences of bad behavior. "The people are punishing the people — why?"

His fiction is another matter, but in Jarrell's poetry there is not, so far as I can find, a single portrait of a genuinely happy child. All the children in his poems — and there are a great many of them — are under attack by a world intent on robbing them of the experience of what the poet regards as a true childhood. Losing comfort, security, certainty, these children look toward their future lives — when they are to have any — with bewilderment and sorrow and sometimes with a skeptical weariness. In some near direction or other lies Childhood, but they have been barred from it.

A solid example of this kind of subject matter is the poem called "Moving." It is one of the simpler and quieter examples, and is perhaps the more effective because of these qualities. "Moving" consists of five stanzas of fairly regularly iambic in irregular line lengths, irregularly rhymed. The three outer stanzas (the final one is a single line) are spoken by a sympathetic outside observer; the inner two stanzas are the interior monologue of a little farm girl, probably of a poor family ("A smeared, banged, tow-headed/ Girl in a flowered, flour-sack print"), who watches

as their belongings are loaded into a van when the family has to move to a new address. It is a disturbing experience for the child, and it is the only experience the poem deals with. The poem's economy is a necessary part of its pathos.

The time is autumn, between Halloween and Thanksgiving (an irony not insisted upon); the girl sits outside, watching her cat play in the windblown fallen leaves. Her weeping has been pacified with a homely sweet, and now she only "Sniffles and holds up her last bite/ Of bread and butter and brown sugar to the wind." She holds the sugared bread up as a ritual offering, rather like a libation, trying to gain some sense of security with rituals both traditional and private. "Butter the cat's paws/ And bread the wind. We are moving." There is probably an ironic echo here of Ecclesiastes: "Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days."

The child in "Moving" is an exceptional little girl, and what she most regrets leaving is her grammar school. It used to be common for sharecropper or poor farm children to have the education they enjoyed and desired so often interrupted and disjointed that it amounted to no education at all. Novelists like Faulkner and Elizabeth Madox Roberts have written touchingly of the experience. Seven lines exhibit the girl's feeling of accomplishment and belonging and her sense of loss:

> I shall never again sing
> Good morning, Dear Teacher, to my own dear teacher.
> Never again
> Will Augusta be the capital of Maine.
> The dew has rusted the catch of the strap of my satchel
> And the sun has fallen from the place where it was chained
> With a blue construction-paper chain. . . .

The latter two lines introduce the strain of imagery of the wallboard pin-up display in the classroom, the imagery that characterizes her feeling of established order breaking down, of things coming apart. She will not be present to help finish the Thanksgiving display with its turkey and pilgrims and Indians. In

a sudden brief flight of fancy, she identifies the paper cut-outs pinned to the wallboard with the constellations which look as if they were pinned to the night sky:

> The witch on the blackboard
> Says: "Put the Plough into the Wagon
> Before it turns into a Bear and sleeps all winter
> In your play-house under the catalpa."

Part of the poet's purpose here is to indicate the boundaries of the girl's universe, which is both enormous and minuscule at the same time; it encompasses the earth and the stars, but only in terms that are homely and familiar. The apocalyptic collision of the constellations, "the Plough into the Wagon," disorders her universe; but she would have observed a real plow loaded into a real wagon anytime that a new field was ready to be plowed. The natural order of things is so intimate to her that she has used one constellation as a reading lamp: "Never again will Orion/ Fall on my speller through the star/ Taped on the broken window by my cot." The natural order she has depended upon is smashed. These lines echo the poignant earlier lines which emphasize the fact that order has disappeared: "Never again/ Will Augusta be the capital of Maine."

The conclusion of the child's train of thought brings in another of Jarrell's favorite themes, that of transformation or metamorphosis. In order to prepare for her new life elsewhere, she must shed her old life, as a snake sheds its skin. "My knee is ridged like corn/ And the scab peels off it." The tactile association of the scab with seed corn on the cob, new seed to be planted in a new field, is a daring one and maybe a little strained — but it is muted. Jarrell, always a tactful poet, no more insists upon his subtler ironies than upon his more obvious ones.

The little girl's final thought is hopeful, or rather, wishful, and wraps up the three separate thematic elements — astronomy, her classroom and scholarly accomplishment, and transformation — in a single couplet alluding to the story of Cinderella. "We are going to live in a new pumpkin/ Under a gold star."

Perhaps there will be a happy ending; perhaps this moving to a new place signals her family's magical transformation into a secure and happy one . . . At any rate, she is mollified, she has found a fantasy that enables her to accept the hard facts of the real world.

The comfort she finds is almost certainly illusory. "One makes a solitude and calls it peace," Jarrell says in his poem, "Conversation with the Devil," and that is what the little girl has done. But for the moment, for her, this comfort is sufficient.

The third part of the poem, however, with its shift to an objective outside observer shatters the warm tone of the girl's thoughts with an abrupt monosyllabic line: "There is not much else." It is an ambiguous line, pointing forward and backward at once: "there is little alternative in the way she *can* think," and, "there is not much left to report."

Jarrell then gives a series of literal details which in their disorder mirror the earlier phantasmagoria of the child's fancies:

> The brass bed bobs to the van.
> The broody hen
> Squawks upside-down — her eggs are boiled;
> The cat is dragged from the limb.

These events are reported in passive mood so that there seems no human agency responsible for them. The bed is not carried, but on its own "bobs" to the van. No one is holding the broody hen by her legs, she simply "Squawks upside-down," and her eggs, which were to be the beginning of a flock, have been boiled. The Halloween cat is dragged from the tree as if being unpinned and taken down from the classroom wallboard. The details are perfectly realistic, but, in passive mood and after the child's confused thoughts, take on an eerie unreal quality. The outer world of fact has become the unfactual world of her inner vision.

This is the real transformation, the true metamorphosis — very unlike the one in the Cinderella story — and the girl now recognizes it. The comfort of her momentary fantasy deserts her. She looks round her at the place she is leaving. "And, yard by

lot, it changes./ Never again." She has lost belief in her fairy tale, "And inches closer to her mother." Now she makes one final desperate attempt to look into her future.

> Then she shuts her eyes, and sits there, and squashed red
> Circles and leaves like colored chalk
> Come on in her dark head
> And are darkened, and float farther
> And farther and farther from the stretched-out hands
> That float out from her in her broody trance:
> She hears her own heart and her cat's heart beating.

The young girl makes an unlikely oracle; she cannot foresee the future. She resembles a little the unsuccessful oracles in *The Waste Land*, but Jarrell's reference here is to Gerard Manley Hopkins' sonnet, "Spelt from Sybil's Leaves," and the mood is just as dark as in that poem. But again it is a muted reference; the image of the girl amid falling leaves both real and imaginary is effective whether Hopkins comes to the reader's mind or not. Yet the contrast between Hopkins' great dark figure at the end of her world and Jarrell's wistful heartsick farm girl at the end of hers adds an unexpected ironic overtone.

Her visionary attempt fails. For comfort and security the child has to return to the real things that surround her in present time. "She holds the cat so close to her he pants."

Now the direction in which Childhood lies is, for this little girl at least, entirely clear: it lies behind. "Never again." And it is as much a geographical place as it is a state of mind or a temporary condition of life. For in Jarrell's poems Childhood exists apart from the children: it is a sort of utopia from which they have been barred.

Exile is the theme of "Moving," just as surely as it is the theme of Jarrell's poems about refugees, displaced persons, and prisoners. And just as it is the theme of some of the poems about aging, like "Next Day." The Marschallin, "die alte Frau," of *Der Rosenkavalier* is a very different person indeed from the little farm

girl; yet it seems inevitable that in her future life she will utter the same words that the Marschallin does in "The Face":

> This is what happens to everyone.
> At first you get bigger, you know more,
> Then something goes wrong.
> You are, and you say I am —
> And you were . . . I've been too long.

SEELE IM RAUM

It sat between my husband and my children.
A place was set for it — a plate of greens.
It had been there: I had seen it
But not somehow — but this was like a dream —
Not seen it so that I knew I saw it.
It was as if I could not know I saw it
Because I had never once in all my life
Not seen it. It was an eland.
An eland! *That* is why the children
Would ask my husband, for a joke, at Christmas:
"Father, is it Donner?" He would say, "No, Blitzen."
It had been there always. Now we put silver
At its place at meals, fed it the same food
We ourselves ate, and said nothing. Many times
When it breathed heavily (when it had tried
A long useless time to speak) and reached to me
So that I touched it — of a different size
And order of being, like the live hard side
Of a horse's neck when you pat the horse —
And looked with its great melting tearless eyes
Fringed with a few coarse wire-like lashes
Into my eyes, and whispered to me
So that my eyes turned backward in their sockets
And they said nothing —
many times
I have known, when they said nothing,
That it did not exist. If they had heard
They *could* not have been silent. And yet they heard;
Heard many times what I have spoken
When it could no longer speak, but only breathe —
When I could no longer speak, but only breathe.

And, after some years, the others came
And took it from me — it was ill, they told me —
And cured it, they wrote me: my whole city
Sent me cards like lilac-branches, mourning
As I had mourned —
and I was standing
By a grave in flowers, by dyed rolls of turf,
And a canvas marquee the last brown of earth.

It is over.
It is over so long that I begin to think
That it did not exist, that I have never —
And my son says, one morning, from the paper:
"An eland. Look, an eland!"
— It was so.

Today, in a German dictionary, I saw *elend*
And the heart in my breast turned over, it was —

It was a word one translates *wretched.*

It is as if someone remembered saying:
"This is an antimacassar that I grew from seed,"
And this were true.
And, truly,
One could not wish for anything more strange —
For anything more. And yet it wasn't *interesting* . . .
— It was worse than impossible, it was a joke.

And yet when it was, I *was* —
Even to think that I once thought
That I could see it is to feel the sweat
Like needles at my hair-roots, I am blind

— It was not even a joke, not even a joke.

Yet how can I believe it? Or believe that I
Owned it, a husband, children? Is my voice the voice
Of that skin of being — of what owns, is owned
In honor or dishonor, that is borne and bears —
Or of that raw thing, the being inside it
That has neither a wife, a husband, nor a child
But goes at last as naked from this world
As it was born into it —

And the eland comes and grazes on its grave.

This is senseless?
Shall I make sense or shall I tell the truth?
Choose either — I cannot do both.

I tell myself that. And yet it is not so,
And what I say afterwards will not be so:
To be at all is to be wrong.
Being is being old
And saying, almost comfortably, across a table
From —
from what I don't know —
in a voice
Rich with a kind of longing satisfaction:
"To own an eland! That's what I call life!"

David St. John

"SEELE IM RAUM"

One of the most fascinating aspects of Randall Jarrell's stunning dramatic monologue "Seele im Raum" is the way we can see so many of Jarrell's lifelong concerns embodied in the poem: his deep love of fable and folk tale; his knowledge of psychology and his close reading of Freud; his constant empathy with the isolate sensibility, so often a woman at odds with her world; his devotion to Rilke, two of whose poems form the underpinning of "Seele im Raum"; and his love of the German language itself, which provides the serious and motivating pun upon which the poem revolves.

* * * *

In the notes to his *Selected Poems*, Jarrell explains, "*Seele im Raum* is the title of one of Rilke's poems; 'Soul in Space' sounded so glib that I couldn't use it instead." In Rilke's poem, the speaking "soul in space" considers both the body it has just left and the question of whether it will ever again enter such a worldly, flesh-bound "body" of constraint. It is a voice that echoes the same raw nakedness as the voice in Jarrell's "Seele im Raum." Yet there is another Rilke poem that stands even more wholly behind "Seele im Raum," a poem Jarrell had translated. The fourth sonnet in the second part of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, based upon the famous tapestry "The Lady and the Unicorn," reads, in Jarrell's version:

> This is the animal that never existed.
> None of them ever knew one; but just the same
> They loved the way it moved, the way it stood
> Looking at them, in pure tranquility.
>
> Of course there wasn't any. But because they loved it
> One became an animal. They always left a space.
> And in the space they had hollowed for it, lightly
> It would lift its head, and hardly need

To exist. They nourished it, not with grain
But only, always, with the possibility
It might be. And this gave so much strength to it

That out of its forehead grew a horn. One horn.
Up to a virgin, silverily, it came
And there within her, there within her glass, it was.

M. Herter Norton's more literal rendering of the final line tells us that the Unicorn "was in the silver-mirror and her." In the second part of *Sonnets to Orpheus*, the fourth sonnet follows Rilke's previous meditations about "space," both exterior and interior space, and about the reflective (reflected) "image" (self) and the nothingness of space within mirrors. It is no accident that Jarrell had linked these two poems of Rilke's in his mind, nor that he chose to braid their concerns into the new fabric of "Seele im Raum." In the tapestry, the Lady holds a mirror, showing the Unicorn its own reflection. It is this same conjunction of self and Other, of self and the mirrored nothingness, that Jarrell exploits in his echoing of the Rilke poems.

* * * *

The woman in "Seele im Raum" has, of course, her own attendant Unicorn — an eland that only she can see, the embodiment and reflection of her own unhappiness. In those same notes to his *Selected Poems*, Jarrell describes an eland as "the largest sort of African antelope — the males are as big as a horse, and you often see people gazing at them, at the zoo, in uneasy wonder." "Uneasy wonder" is a good way to describe how the speaker's family, and we, view her eland as well, as it becomes clear that the animal is an emblem of her soul's trapped, breathless terror. In her own self-doubt, in the erosion of her identity, the woman in "Seele im Raum" has posited an eland to stand for her soul, an objectified and palpable (if only to her) manifestation of her soul's distress. Hers too is a soul in space, solitary and remote.

After her eland has been "taken" from her, after she has been "cured," the woman stumbles upon the unconscious link

that language has forged for her; she discovers the unwitting proclamation her eland has been: "Today, in a German dictionary, I saw *elend* / And the heart in my breast turned over, it was — // It was a word one translates *wretched*." She goes on to express her tremendous ambivalence about this discovery, and about her companion of the past.

> And, truly,
> One could not wish for anything more strange —
> For anything more. And yet it wasn't *interesting* . . .
> — It was worse than impossible, it was a joke.
>
> And yet when it was, I *was* —

It's wonderful to now recall Rilke's own comment about his Unicorn, quoted from a letter: "In the Unicorn no accompanying parallel with Christ is meant; only all love for the not-proved, the not-tangible, all belief in the worth and reality of that which our spirit has through the centuries created and exalted for itself, may be praised in it."

* * * *

In the whole of the second half of "Seele im Raum" the speaker considers exactly what the "worth and reality" of her spirit's creation, the eland, has been for her as she reflects upon her present "healthy" state. Her recognition that the raw, pure being — her soul's naked self/creation — is dead is absolutely harrowing. In the culmination of her meditation, she wonders:

> Yet how can I believe it? Or believe that I
> Owned it, a husband, children? Is my voice the voice
> Of that skin of being — of what owns, is owned
> In honor or dishonor, that is borne and bears —
> Or of that raw thing, the being inside it
> That has neither a wife, a husband, nor a child
> But goes at last as naked from this world
> As it was born into it —

And the eland comes and grazes on its grave.

This is senseless?
Shall I make sense or shall I tell the truth?
Choose either — I cannot do both.

The profound conflict in this passage, between her own emotional truths and with "making sense," creates one of the most poignant moments in all of Jarrell's poetry. Yet there remains something indomitable about her, something valiant, wise, and defiant.

I tell myself that. And yet it is not so,
And what I say afterwards will not be so:
To be at all is to be wrong.
Being is being old
And saying, almost comfortably, across a table
From —
from what I don't know —
in a voice
Rich with a kind of longing satisfaction:
"To own an eland! That's what I call life!"

* * * *

It is this unravelling of emotional self-truths, the baring of such searing pain, that always startles me when I read "Seele im Raum." The dualism that both Jarrell and Rilke saw as a necessary and vital aspect of life is, for most of us, an unresolvable tension. Perhaps the lesson is simply that one needs great courage if one is to try living like the panther of Norman Dubie's poem "For Randall Jarrell," leaping, and "Making it, which could mean,/ Into this world or some other. And between." Certainly the woman of "Seele im Raum" is living in the held breath of that leap.

THE TRUTH

When I was four my father went to Scotland.
They *said* he went to Scotland.

When I woke up I think I thought that I was dreaming —
I was so little then that I thought dreams
Are in the room with you, like the cinema.
That's why you don't dream when it's still light —
They pull the shades down when it is, so you can sleep.
I thought that then, but that's not right.
Really it's in your head.

And it was light then — light at *night*.
I heard Stalky bark outside.
But really it was Mother crying —
She coughed so hard she cried.
She kept shaking Sister,
She shook her and shook her.
I thought Sister had had her nightmare.
But he wasn't barking, he had died.
There was dirt all over Sister.
It was all streaks, like mud. I cried.
She didn't, but she was older.
I thought she didn't
Because she was older, I thought Stalky had just gone.
I got *everything* wrong.
I didn't get one single thing right.
It seems to me that I'd have thought
It didn't happen, like a dream,
Except that it was light. At night.
They burnt our house down, they burnt down London.
Next day my mother cried all day, and after that
She said to me when she would come to see me:
"Your father has gone away to Scotland.
He will be back after the war."

The war then was different from the war now.
The war now is *nothing*.

I used to live in London till they burnt it.
What was it like? It was just like here.
No, that's the truth.
My mother would come here, some, but she would cry.
She said to Miss Elise, "He's not himself";
She said, "Don't you love me any more at all?"
I was *my*self.
Finally she wouldn't come at all.
She never said one thing my father said, or Sister.
Sometimes she did,
Sometimes she was the same, but that was when I dreamed it.
I could tell I was dreaming, she was just the same.

That Christmas she bought me a toy dog.

I asked her what was its name, and when she didn't know
I asked her over, and when she didn't know
I said, "You're not my mother, you're not my mother.
She *hasn't* gone to Scotland, she is dead!"
And she said, "Yes, he's dead, he's dead!"
And cried and cried; she *was* my mother,
She put her arms around me and we cried.

Ralph Burns

THE PLAIN TRUTH IN "THE TRUTH"

Thirty years ago, in an essay that begins, "Why are we two?," James Dickey complained that Randall Jarrell's poems lack verbal intensity, that "the unstated and insistent principle underlying the later poems is 'The situation is enough.' " One poem upon which Dickey focuses in his dialogue between Reader A and Reader B is "The Truth." Reader A reads the poem aloud in a "slow, grave, choking voice," then pouts, "It takes *courage* to be sentimental nowadays." Reader B devilishly advocates "Collingwood's definition" of craft, which is "just sophisticated journalism . . . working up a predictable emotion"; and says that the writer behind "The Truth" lacks "the power, or the genius, or the talent, or the inclination, or whatever, to make experience rise to its own most intense, concentrated, and meaningful level, a level impossible without *that* poet's having caught it in *those* words."

I disagree. Jarrell's care in creating such a difficult speaker rescues "The Truth" from sentimentality. He attends to the rhetorical powers in choosing *that* character to speak, inevitably, "*those* words" in *that* way. The words are plain, and they must be. They are spoken by a child who has no choice but to go over and over his situation. Jarrell steals the poem from its situation through his attention to the rhetorical possibilities of choosing an expressively limited speaker, one whose available vocabulary works with and against obsessive internal and end rhyme, word repetition, tactical line breaks, parallel sentence-structures, and a few well-placed grammatical mistakes that leap out like passion marks on a Baptist.

In his introduction to the *Selected Poems*, Jarrell informs the reader (needlessly, I think) that "the little boy in 'The Truth' has had his father, his sister, and his dog killed in one of the early air-raids on London, and has been taken to the country, to a sort of mental institution." From the beginning the boy questions the reality of his situation, suggested chiefly through two of Jarrell's most distinctive devices — sestina-like repetition of end words and the repetition of sounds, words, and phrases in close juxta-

position. In a poem of fifty-four lines, four rhymes or repeated end words — *dreams, light, night, cried* — ride the poem loosely to its close. The child speaker, traumatized by the death of his father, sister and dog and his own physical and emotional dislocation, yearns for any repeatable pattern.

Early in the poem Jarrell uses the dash, particularizing the tentative, contradictory and complex nature of the boy's getting at the truth of where his father and sister are; who his mother is; how dream and reality remain discrete (if they do) and what they are. In the first two-line stanza the boy repeats as end phrases "went to Scotland," underscoring his helplessness in "locating" his father; and points accusingly to an amorphous "They," presumably the clinicians at the mental hospital and his mother, who kept him from "The Truth." In the first line of the second stanza he numbly repeats the pronoun "I" four times, combining them with three closely positioned, tongued-thickening "th" sounds. Each successive line qualifies both the boy's and our own understanding of the truth of his situation, whether "dreams/ Are in the room with you, like the cinema," that imitation of dream and life that was often, as Jarrell's war children understood it, a means of escape; whether by way of Goethe, the truth will set him free; or whether he can escape from the present through dreaming a selective past: "Sometimes she was the same, but that was when I dreamed it./ I could tell I was dreaming, she was just the same."

Jarrell's syntax is usually straightforward, and the sentence types in "The Truth" are harrowingly alike and simple. In fact, the values that inform "The Truth," that plain language and syntax are fit for a poem spoken by a plain child after a plain ugly air-raid, also say that the best arrangement for the poem is predominantly syntactical line breaks which work with and against a number of disquietingly dead-pan parallel sentence-structures:

They pull the shades down when it is, so you can sleep.

I thought that then, but that's not right.

But it was light then — light at *night*.

But he wasn't barking, he had died.

They burnt our house down, they burnt down London.

Moving down the poem, the reader becomes increasingly aware of an innervating, almost hypertensive sameness, a nausea of recurrence, the absurdity, the dread that claims, "The war now is *nothing*." And that revealed absence is echoed and prepared for by a lack of descriptive particulars, hardly any informative adjectives and adverbs, only three metaphors, none elaborately drawn —

I thought dreams
Are in the room with you, like the cinema.

It was all streaks, like mud.

It didn't happen, like a dream.

Further, the referents for "they" in the first and sixth stanza and the immediate referent for the "it" of "Really it's in your head . . ." are ambiguous and prepare for two crucial confusions of person — the switch from Sister to Stalky back to Sister in the boy's grappling with the truth of his sister's death, and later, in the last stanza, when he begins to accept his father's death through a strategic "wrong" pronoun:

I said, "You're not my mother, you're not my mother.
She *hasn't* gone to Scotland, she is dead!"
And she said, "Yes, he's dead, he's dead!"
And cried and cried; she *was* my mother,
She put her arms around me and we cried.

The audacity of the last line is in its predictable, yet engagingly courageous and emancipating sob, its faith that the real unreality of war and personal trauma can, by simply being what it is,

serve paradoxically as its own most imaginative emblem. I can think of no other modern dramatic poet who, more than Jarrell, speaks plainly without being flat or who sees more piercingly by seeing what is there. Toward the end of "The Obscurity of the Poet," an essay written a few years before Dickey's, in the late forties, Jarrell says:

> Art matters not merely because it is the most magnificent ornament and the most nearly unfailing occupation of our lives, but because it is life itself. From Christ to Freud we have believed that, if we know the truth, the truth will set us free: art is indispensable because so much of this truth can be learned through works of art and through works of art alone.

NESTUS GURLEY

Sometimes waking, sometimes sleeping,
Late in the afternoon, or early
In the morning, I hear on the lawn,
On the walk, on the lawn, the soft quick step,
The sound half song, half breath: a note or two
That with a note or two would be a tune.
It is Nestus Gurley.

It is an old
Catch or snatch or tune
In the Dorian mode: the mode of the horses
That stand all night in the fields asleep
Or awake, the mode of the cold
Hunter, Orion, wheeling upside-down,
All space and stars, in cater-cornered Heaven.
When, somewhere under the east,
The great march begins, with birds and silence;
When, in the day's first triumph, dawn
Rides over the houses, Nestus Gurley
Delivers to me my lot.

As the sun sets, I hear my daughter say:
"He has four routes and makes a hundred dollars."
Sometimes he comes with dogs, sometimes with children,
Sometimes with dogs and children.
He collects, today.
I hear my daughter say:
"Today Nestus has got on his derby."
And he says, after a little: "It's two-eighty."
"How could it be two-eighty?"
"Because this month there're five Sundays: it's two-eighty."

He collects, delivers. Before the first, least star
Is lost in the paling east; at evening

While the soft, side-lit gold-leafed day
Lingers to see the stars, the boy Nestus
Delivers to me the Morning Star, the Evening Star
— Ah no, only the Morning *News*, the Evening *Record*
Of what I have done and what I have not done
Set down and held against me in the Book
Of Death, on paper yellowing
Already, with one morning's sun, one evening's sun.

Sometimes I only dream him. He brings then
News of a different morning, a judgment not of men.
The bombers have turned back over the Pole,
Having met a star. . . . I look at that new year
And, waking, think of our Moravian Star
Not lit yet, and the pure beeswax candle
With its red flame-proofed paper pompom
Not lit yet, and the sweetened
Bun we brought home from the love-feast, still not eaten,
And the song the children sang: *O Morning Star* —

And at this hour, to the dew-hushed drums
Of the morning, Nestus Gurley
Marches to me over the lawn; and the cat Elfie,
Furred like a musk-ox, coon-tailed, gold-leaf-eyed,
Looks at the paper boy without alarm
But yawns, and stretches, and walks placidly
Across the lawn to his ladder, climbs it, and begins to purr.
I let him in,
Go out and pick up from the grass the paper hat
Nestus has folded: this tricorne fit for a Napoleon
Of our days and institutions, weaving
Baskets, being bathed, receiving
Electric shocks, Rauwolfia. . . . I put it on
— Ah no, only unfold it.
There is dawn inside; and I say to no one

About —
it is a note or two
That with a note or two would —
say to no one
About nothing: "He delivers dawn."

When I lie coldly
— Lie, that is, neither with coldness nor with warmth —
In the darkness that is not lit by anything,
In the grave that is not lit by anything
Except our hope: the hope
That is not proofed against anything, but pure
And shining as the first, least star
That is lost in the east on the morning of Judgment —
May I say, recognizing the step
Or tune or breath. . . .
recognizing the breath,
May I say, "It is Nestus Gurley."

DAY FOR NIGHT

About one-third of the way through Randall Jarrell's *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* (1960), his next-to-last collection, comes "Nestus Gurley," a poem about a paperboy, or, more accurately, about a man's mythologizing of his paperboy. A hushed, ecstatic piece, full of verbal music and appreciative side-glances, it is not very characteristic of the tones and subjects of its collection. Most of the book is more somber, and even the more lighthearted pieces, like "Deutsch Durch Freud" and "Charles Dodgson's Song" are cross-cultural and historical in subject. "Nestus Gurley" is emphatically local, domestic, of its own place and time, like the book's title poem and like many of the poems in the final collection, *The Lost World* (1965). While it is not spoken by Randall Jarrell in Greensboro, North Carolina, its speaker is a very similar person in an even more similar place.

Place matters in this case, I think. The poem is about the mythologizing of the everyday, and the everyday here is the one that the poet lived and worked in. Jarrell has put aside his fruitful preoccupation with European, especially German, culture and imagination. The effect is even more striking when one considers that the poem is followed in the volume by twelve translations from the German. I'm not claiming that the organization of *Zoo* is ideal, just that the poem tends to stand out in its context in Jarrell's canon.

Is "Nestus Gurley" too long? I don't think so. Jarrell is experimenting, here as elsewhere, with a garrulous style, with a somewhat compulsive speaker. It's risky, but I think he gets away with it. Once inside the poem's circle of invention and precarious enchantment, we don't want it to end. Seventy-eight lines on this curious subject don't seem excessive, even though the poem doesn't advance rapidly from one insight to another but slowly wraps its subject in a dreamy web of meanings and associations, standing back, as it were, between stanzas to admire its handiwork.

The first thing we are apt to notice about the poem's style is

its extensive use of balance. Waking and sleeping, day and night, morning and afternoon, cold and warm, birdsong and silence, collecting and delivering, dark and light: the speaker could strike us as indecisive with all his qualifying if what seems at first to be hesitation didn't turn out to be precision:

> Sometimes waking, sometimes sleeping,
> Late in the afternoon, or early
> In the morning, I hear on the lawn,
> On the walk, on the lawn, the soft quick step . . .

It's not either/or, it's both, and the sense of magic, the ground for the poem's eventual metaphysical (and mock-metaphysical) reach, comes from the paperboy's apparent freedom from normal space and time. He comes and goes as angels and deities do.

The qualifyings and overlappings of the style also give rise to incantatory effects of repetition. Rhymes are infrequent in this poem but they occur here (isn't the very same word in some sense the purest form of rhyme?) in the form of single and double repetitions:

> Sometimes he comes with dogs, sometimes with children,
> Sometimes with dogs and children . . .
>
> And he says, after a little: "It's two-eighty."
> "How could it be two-eighty?"
> "Because this month there're two Sundays: it's
> two-eighty . . ."
>
> In the darkness that is not lit by anything,
> In the grave that is not lit by anything . . .

Mornings return, seasons return. Words recur, circulating in a slow, hypnotic dance.

The paperboy's magic is a wonderful compound of familiar and unfamiliar possibilities. His "half song, half breath" is in "the Dorian mode." It is also "the mode of the horses" in the field at night and of the constellation Orion, a mixture of wondrous

vastness and comical indignity, "wheeling upside-down,/ All space and stars, in cater-cornered Heaven." And Nestus's times are special too, the thresholds when light is mythic — "at evening/ While the soft, side-lit, gold-leafed day/ Lingers to see the stars" — and when transformations affect even housecats — "Elfie,/ Furred like a musk-ox, coon-tailed, gold-leaf-eyed." Morning rhymes with evening; the cat's eyes rhyme with the "side-lit" part of the day.

At some point in the exploration of this poem our attention shifts from Nestus Gurley to the unnamed speaker, whose half-conscious self-portrait the poem really is. He has a daughter (which helps us distinguish him from Jarrell). He is very literate. He is wry and tender and observant. He can catch himself waxing too poetic — "Ah no" — and his heroic mode tends to deflate gently into mock-heroic, as in "When, in the day's first triumph, dawn/ Rides over the houses" and "to the dew-hushed drums/ Of the morning." His consciousness can just barely keep at arm's-length the sorrows contained in the daily papers Nestus Gurley brings. An irony lurks in the fact that the newsboy both makes the world *new* by providing structure, freshness and magic, and brings the *news* that kills the sense of wonder and renewal. Twice the outside world, the world of the newspaper, encroaches dangerously, first in the form of anxiety about nuclear war (treated as ludicrously fanciful "news" in "The bombers have turned back over the Pole,/ Having met a star . . ."), and again in the image of the modern world as a madhouse with a Napoleon in a paper hat as its only appropriate ruler, a role the speaker starts to accept ("I put it on/ — Ah no, only unfold it") before rejecting it. He seems to know quite a lot about how mental illness is treated. If he has had episodes of his own, he now seems to have found a balance that allows fantasy a crucial role in life ("There is dawn inside") without assuming too much for it. Whether we see his peace as precarious or firm, we sense that it is hard-won. Our enthusiasm shifts from Nestus to his most appreciative customer.

The shy comedy of the final stanza has several marvelous touches. There is the suspended syntax that does not tell us what

tense we are in from "When I lie coldly" to the first "May I say" eight lines later. There are the line breaks between first and second, fourth and fifth, lines. There is the recycling of images — e.g. star, candle, dawn, Judgment Day — from the rest of the poem. There is the repetition of "Recognizing the breath."

What does that last repetition *mean?* Better to ask what it suggests. The speaker imagines himself after death, waiting in the grave for a possible Day of Judgment. He imagines the newsboy coming to announce it and asks that he be able to recognize this herald and name him. That act would turn him back to an ordinary paperboy and the Day of Judgment to just another "dew-hushed" morning, the wordly and the otherworldly, the diurnal and the eternal, twinning, interacting, rhyming. The emphasis on breath will evoke the Holy Ghost for some, the idea of inspiration for others. Gods are sometimes recognized in classical epics by their step. Angels may be known by their music, their "tune." Breath seems so mortal, so quintessentially human, that it both evokes the old myth of bodily resurrection and returns us to the everyday, where the poem began and must end, since the speaker is only fantasizing a death and resurrection in which he hopes his paperboy might figure. How strange! How American! Could any other culture have produced it? Jarrell's thoughtful study of Frost and Williams probably contributed to this poem; his increasing sympathy for Stevens too. And the result is queer, comical, touching.

Jarrell was an enthusiast, but deeply melancholy for all his wonder and energy. Most of his best poems are tinged with terror and loss as well as with joy. "Nestus Gurley" is a little different in having so much celebration and so little sorrow. Perhaps that makes it a lesser piece. But who would want to change it?

BATS

A bat is born
Naked and blind and pale.
His mother makes a pocket of her tail
And catches him. He clings to her long fur
By his thumbs and toes and teeth.
And then the mother dances through the night
Doubling and looping, soaring, somersaulting —
Her baby hangs on underneath.
All night, in happiness, she hunts and flies.
Her high sharp cries
Like shining needlepoints of sound
Go out into the night and, echoing back,
Tell her what they have touched.
She hears how far it is, how big it is,
Which way it's going:
She lives by hearing.
The mother eats the moths and gnats she catches
In full flight; in full flight
The mother drinks the water of the pond
She skims across. Her baby hangs on tight.
Her baby drinks the milk she makes him
In moonlight or starlight, in mid-air.
Their single shadow, printed on the moon
Or fluttering across the stars,
Whirls on all night; at daybreak
The tired mother flaps home to her rafter.
The others all are there.
They hang themselves up by their toes,
They wrap themselves in their brown wings.
Bunched upside-down, they sleep in air.
Their sharp ears, their sharp teeth, their quick sharp faces
Are dull and slow and mild.
All the bright day, as the mother sleeps,
She folds her wings about her sleeping child.

Nancy Willard

RADIANT FACTS

> My grandmother, like other grandmothers, used to tell me fairy tales; when she was tired she would just reminisce. I used to say, when I couldn't get a story: "Nanny, tell me some Facts."
>
> *Pictures from an Institution*

If all the existing copies of Randall Jarrell's books for children were to vanish from the earth, the one I would miss most is *The Bat-Poet,* with *The Animal Family* a close second. How could I describe my loss to those who hadn't read them? I could say "*The Bat-Poet* is the story of a brown bat who differs from the rest of his species: he stays awake during the day and makes up poems." But I have given away only the plot, the shape of *what happens next* — a question very few readers are likely to ask.

Jarrell himself described *The Bat-Poet* as "half for children and half for grown-ups." Probably Jarrell knew that children would outgrow his first book for children, *The Gingerbread Rabbit.* "I enjoyed it," he told an interviewer for WBAI, "but it wasn't a real book." He had turned to children's books at a time when he found himself unable to write poems. When he started *The Bat-Poet,* it absorbed him as deeply as any poem.

> You know how it is . . . you work on it all the time. You stay awake at night . . . you wake up in the middle of the night . . . I did it just like a grown-up book. By good luck, we had some bats on our porch and so I imagined a bat who would not *write* poems, but anyway make them up. And so, *I had to make up poems* for him. . . . And a couple of the poems were pretty much like grown-up poems. Anyway the *New Yorker* printed them . . .[1]

1. All the direct quotations from Randall Jarrell are taken from the interview with Aaron Kramer, excerpts of which are printed on the jacket of Caedmon recording TC 1364, "The Bat-Poet," read by the author.

"Once upon a time there was a bat — a little light brown bat, the color of coffee with cream in it." Though Jarrell uses the traditional fairy tale beginning, *The Bat-Poet* is no fairy tale; there are unpleasant characters but no evil ones, there are animals that talk but no transformations. Neither is it a fable, for all its beasts. The bat is not a stand-in for an idea; ideas do not hang upside down from the roof of one's porch. "He was a kind of cafe-au-lait brown and I made him the Bat-Poet." The cardinal and chipmunk took sunflower seeds at Jarrell's back yard feeder long before they took their places in his story.

Only the mockingbird, the self-centered, territorial genius, would be at home in one of Aesop's tales. There he would get his just deserts. Here he merely offends and dazzles the animals with whom he reluctantly shares his world. "Mockingbirds are not only more like artists than other birds, they're more like people, too," Jarrell observed. His wife was more specific. "In life, Frost and Cal were Mockingbirds; Michael di Capus and I were Chipmunks, of sorts; and Bob Watson and Randall were bats."[2]

We are given the bat's poems but not the mockingbird's; the paradox of how the mockingbird creates is sufficient reason for including him in the book. And it's the bat, not the bird, who sees the paradox clearly:

> Now, in the moonlight, he sits here and sings.
> A thrush is singing, then a thrasher, then a jay —
> Then, all at once, a cat begins meowing.
> A mockingbird can sound like anything.
> He imitates the world he drove away
> So well that for a minute, in the moonlight,
> Which one's the mockingbird? which one's the world?[3]

The progress of the bat-poet is less paradoxical. Starting

2. Mrs. Randall Jarrell, "The Group of Two," *Randall Jarrell 1914-1965*, edited by Robert Lowell (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1967), p. 290. All quotations from Mrs. Jarrell are taken from this essay, and page numbers noted in the text.

3. *The Bat-Poet* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 28. For all other quotations from this book, the page numbers will be noted in the text.

with the slow awakening of the senses, it unfolds along more familiar roads: groping for the right image, overcoming writer's block ("I can't make up a poem about the cardinal. . . . I watch him and he's just beautiful, he'd make a beautiful poem; but I can't think of anything" [p. 25]), and finding an audience ("The trouble isn't making poems, the trouble's finding somebody that will listen to them" [p. 15]). The philosopher who crept out of Plato's cave was not more dazzled than the bat-poet, nor more in need of a new language to tell what he saw. "Shadows are black," exclaim the other bats, "how can a shadow be bright?" "What's green-and-gold-and-blue? When you say things like that we don't know what you mean." "And it's just not real . . . When the sun rises the world goes to sleep" (p. 6).

While the mockingbird turns away from the world he imitates, the bat-poet turns toward it and makes "portraits in verse." He and William Carlos Williams would have understood each other, though the bat-poet's portraits, metered and rhymed, are a far cry from the gallery of Williams' old women, flowers, and still lifes. If Jarrell's bat were a painter instead of a poet, he would paint his portraits with the inspired realism of a Van Eyck; he would show us every feather on the angel's wing. And his faithful audience, the chipmunk, would respond to a painting of himself as he does to the poem: "You put in the seeds and the hole and everything . . . I didn't think you could" (p. 22).

When at last the bat-poet composes a poem for the other bats, he has learned how to build poems out of facts. But these are radiant facts; images, verbs, music, and story have worked on them:

> A bat is born
> Naked and blind and pale.
> His mother makes a pocket of her tail
> And catches him. He clings to her long fur
> By his thumbs and toes and teeth.
> And then the mother dances through the night
> Doubling and looping, soaring, somersaulting —
> Her baby hangs on underneath.

All night, in happiness, she hunts and flies.
Her high sharp cries
Like shining needlepoints of sound
Go out into the night and, echoing back,
Tell her what they have touched.
She hears how far it is, how big it is,
Which way it's going.
She lives by hearing.

(p. 36)

In their best moments, poets do not choose their material; their material chooses them. Both *The Bat-Poet* and *The Animal Family* chose Jarrell, "took hold of him," as his wife put it. In *The Animal Family*, a man left alone on the coast where he has lived all his life finds himself a family by letting himself be found — by a mermaid, a bear, a lynx, and a boy. A fantastic story, yet like *The Bat-Poet* it is built on the observable details of Jarrell's life. His own family watched with astonishment the transformation of the familiar into the stuff of story:

> Daily, like a small glacier, it gathered up objects such as deerskin rugs from Salzburg, the new window seat we'd added, the Gucci hunting horn over our brick hearth. . . . Into this setting Randall put a bearded hunter and a mermaid, the lynx from the Washington Zoo, the seals from Laguna days, and finally he gave them a boy who wanted to be adopted by *The Animal Family.*
>
> ("The Group of Two," pp. 296-297)

Very likely the wise women who told their tales to the brothers Grimm gathered the stuff of *their* surroundings when they set forth a new story; spinning wheels and miller's daughters were common as pennies once upon a time. Jarrell is both the wise woman telling the story and the amazed writer respectfully setting it down. "Sometimes you feel you have good *luck* with a book . . . Things *come* to you. And I feel that . . . *The Bat-Poet*, for what it is, is done right."

FIELD AND FOREST

When you look down from the airplane you see lines,
Roads, ruts, braided into a net or web —
Where people go, what people do: the ways of life.

Heaven says to the farmer: "What's your field?"
And he answers: "Farming," with a field,
Or: "Dairy-farming," with a herd of cows.
They seem a boy's toy cows, seen from this high.

Seen from this high,
The fields have a terrible monotony.

But between the lighter patches there are dark ones.
A farmer is separated from a farmer
By what farmers have in common: forests,
Those dark things — what the fields were to begin with.
At night a fox comes out of the forest, eats his chickens.
At night the deer come out of the forest, eat his crops.

If he could he'd make farm out of all the forest,
But it isn't worth it: some of it's marsh, some rocks,
There are things there you couldn't get rid of
With a bulldozer, even — not with dynamite.
Besides, he likes it. He had a cave there, as a boy;
He hunts there now. It's a waste of land,
But it would be a waste of time, a waste of money,
To make it into anything but what it is.

At night, from the airplane, all you see is lights,
A few lights, the lights of houses, headlights,
And darkness. Somewhere below, beside a light,
The farmer, naked, takes out his false teeth:
He doesn't eat now. Takes off his spectacles:
He doesn't see now. Shuts his eyes.

If he were able to he'd shut his ears,
And as it is, he doesn't hear with them.
Plainly, he's taken out his tongue: he doesn't talk.
His arms and legs: at least, he doesn't move them.
They are knotted together, curled up, like a child's.
And after he has taken off the thoughts
It has taken him his life to learn,
He takes off, last of all, the world.

When you take off everything what's left? A wish,
A blind wish; and yet the wish isn't blind,
What the wish wants to see, it sees.

There in the middle of the forest is the cave
And there, curled up inside it, is the fox.

He stands looking at it.
Around him the fields are sleeping: the fields dream.
At night there are no more farmers, no more farms.
At night the fields dream, the fields *are* the forest.
The boy stands looking at the fox
As if, if he looked long enough —
                he looks at it.
Or is it the fox that's looking at the boy?
The trees can't tell the two of them apart.

Marianne Boruch

RHETORIC AND MYSTERY

Some poems are profoundly, willfully plain. Like efficient but passionate hosts bored by the party, they usher us *out*, past the church, past the large showy houses that look like cakes, into the blank countryside of a listless month, November maybe. Little is said really, and what's said is repeated, moving with reserve and overlap toward the secret of the trip. No digression, that brief glad accident against purpose. Nothing ornate, airy, playful. Wonder is carefully distilled into weight, not a gift but a given. When all stops, just above treeline, we are nodded to the old quarry abandoned for years, spread out before us like some heroic aftermath, cliffs that startle by color, size, but mainly now by a massive repetitive uselessness. This presence, kept, is what the poem exhausts itself to know, this private thing which has no reason but being, that lovely fierce mystery. I'm imagining Randell Jarrell writing "Field and Forest," and I imagine it caught him off-guard. In spite of his rhetorical current and rise, something unpredictable swamps the journey by the end, something mute and close as joy — or terror. Jarrell, with a kind of spent courage, lets it take over, lets the poem steer itself.

All begins coolly enough, in an airplane, higher than we normally conceive of things. That the country below keeps to its "terrible monotony" or reminds us of something it never is close up — roads become webs and nets, cows "toy cows" — is more than a visual trick; it settles us into our seats, makes us believe we are, in fact, in air. From this distance, seeing the whole thing — what appears to be the whole thing — we can judge, dismember, calculate, condescend with impunity. After all, no one's watching us. We are oddly alone here, though technology — the airplane itself with its humming complex order, or this initial perspective that abstractly gathers in groups, thinks "ways of life," thinks people and their "fields" — is public not private realization. Immediately, seemingly irreversibly, we are in the grip of Jarrell's familiar rhetoric: his automatic assumption of audience, his authority, his careful definition: all trademarks — consciously

so, I suspect — and lovingly nurtured through years. As usual then, we are sitting back, waiting for Jarrell's offhand intellectual delight or anguish, waiting, that is, until the jolt. One word — "but" — opens the heavy door swiftly. "But," the poet warns, "between the lighter patches there are dark ones."

Returning, reconsidering, reopening the seamless world, delivering us out of completion by the gift of doubt: the line is a second look. Though we still feel that guarded rhetorical momentum, there *is* darkness now — thank god — amid the "lighter patches," and cleverly Jarrell tells us that "a farmer is separated from a farmer/ By what farmers have in common: forests" — a cleverness which turns on itself as Frost's sometimes does, in deadpan deliberate measure. What I love next is the undercut — abrupt and childlike — a fresh way of definition in the poem, spoken right now. "Forests," Jarrell declares, "those dark things — what the fields were to begin with." One hears earnest, young impatience in the voice. "Those dark things. . . ." *You* know. And then, with reverie, belied by an encyclopedic calm come the dangerous facts of such woods: foxes emerge and eat chickens; deer move out and destroy crops. Always "at night," of course, that universe without distinction or control, reason or safety, that absolute and inhuman substance.

By now we are deeply, helplessly descending, launched from the plane completely, inventing an owner, a farmer and his lifetime of sweat and silence in these fields. The farmer thinks like a farmer, with practicality; he is not romanticized. Jarrell is too realistic a poet for that. Sure the guy would like to farm all this knotty worthless woods. Ways exist; they don't work. "There are things there you couldn't get rid of/ With a bulldozer, even — not with dynamite," we hear, or overhear, for this is the sort of remark that comes drifting above the spring seed bins in hardware stores, this wonderful injunction that layers like a virus, hitting the body by degrees, in various calculations of meaning. We know by its weight that here is some major artery of the poem, some forecast, some gleaming shard heralding a buried city. Still, Jarrell is offhand, staging, still in-character. "Besides," the poet

tells us of the farmer, "he likes it. He had a cave there, as a boy," as if apology were needed at this image that cuts back to our primitive longing for shelter and solitude, for a place before history or manners, ambition or definition. It would be a waste, the poet-farmer voice continues with purposeful bravado, purposefully beside the point, a waste of land, time, money to make it "anything but what it is." *What it is.* We are suddenly arrived at the primal kernel of something. What is it? One feels the chill, the suspension at the edge: the possibility of embarrassment or vision. The idea at hand is that large.

Instead, Jarrell's off target, not ready. He shifts back, barely, breaking stanza — back to observation, description, to the high concise confines of the plane in a brief seizure of routine and reason. He chants the hard details. Up here, one sees "lights,/ a few lights, the lights of houses, headlights,/ And darkness." Mostly, of course, darkness. Which is to say, one sees nothing at all. This is dream. We are aloft over fields that may or may not be fields anymore. We lose hold of proof. There is memory, certainly, and Jarrell loves its earnest, if inexact, digressions, like those of the eye to explain and continue. Darkness, however, is indifferent; it levels and forgets, and one feels the poet stalling in these few lines, a swimmer coming up in a passion for common air, lulled by the plane's bright efficiency, gearing up — for what? Does he even know? Before, invention took us as far as the cave, the farmer disguising his need with such reasonable reasons. How willing is Jarrell now to let imagination fall as darkness falls, as a seed falls windward, complete and inert; how willing is this rational poet to disappear at his high florescent window? If he is stalling — I sense he must be — then some dangerous turn is imminent, some impossible possibility. "Somewhere below," the poet gropes, "beside a light" — of course, he enters in secret, his eye at the keyhole — "the farmer, naked, takes out his false teeth." Not any farmer, *the* farmer — of the cave, of the ominous orderly tangle of field and forest. In a second, all is aging. The farmer's instantly old, alone for years. And the listing that follows, echo of grandparent after grandparent witnessing to ail-

ments like a serious collector at his stamps, buries us with stilling detail: tooth and eye, ear and tongue, all diminished. " . . . he doesn't move them." Arms and legs. "They are knotted together, curled up, like a child's."

Envision this room then, and the gradual, almost matter-of-fact reduction of body. The poet, however, cuts further, *faces* further — to experience, to human memory itself. "And after he has taken off the thoughts/ It has taken him his life to learn,/ He takes off, last of all, the world." Jarrell ends the stanza with extraordinary poise: one word again — the world — which takes a lifetime to enter. But beyond exhaustion now, beyond gratitude even, one slips out of it easily, in a minute, the way at bedside, one slips out of a shirt too big, too worn, too familiar. In turn, a stanza break stalls us, just when we need it, silent here, witness to the full dark expanse within the farmer, which seeps past this hour back to middle age, to youth, to boyhood like a rich black greed. We are down in this descent to "what's left," to the final living nub, this thing that can't be altered in us. "A wish," Jarrell insists, that is blind and not so blind, for what it "wants to see, it sees." Desire then, past will, which is to say, past human invention or relish or courage, as if our lot is to endure desire, its ravages and gifts, as if this alone defines us.

At this point, though, Jarrell is past philosophy too, narrowing like some heat-sensitive device toward the heart of the vision, off abstraction at last, off its surgical distillation onto pure image. There is the forest, and there inside it, like hidden wealth, is the cave. Smaller, like some folktale riddle, the next secret waits in these rich dim layers: the fox of course, curled up in the cave, fetal and complete. "He," Jarrell tells us simply, "stands looking at it." *He* — the farmer, with his one wish, returning merely to witness what beauty and danger he kept from harm, to look as long as it takes to be there. The poet pulls back, to backdrop and foreground telling us everything's near this knowledge: "the fields dream," he tells us. More, "At night . . . the fields *are* the forest." Then, in a similar transfer, more remarkable, it's "the

boy" looking at the fox, as if what light there is — light of wish, of desire — springs this single sudden flight back to pure attention. "As if," the poet manages, "if he looked long enough — " As if, as if . . . The poet is, unbelievably out of words — out of metaphor, explanation, out of meaning.

Jarrell — does he have a choice? — waits here, poised in the near-empty length of line. One recovers from mystery slowly, no doubt more slowly than this, but now the speaker is not asking to know anything at all. What began in this poem, this need to contain, to classify, to distance and simplify has ended — was anything less predictable? — in this extraordinary moment of speechlessness: night and its dreaming field taken mutely into the body like some ancient elixir to cleanse and merge. The boy or the fox? Who's looking at whom, Jarrell asks. But even as he asks, he's beyond us, long past this calculation, this concern, throwing such small confining dazzlements elsewhere, to trees even.

THE HOUSE IN THE WOOD

At the back of the houses there is the wood.
While there is a leaf of summer left, the wood

Makes sounds I can put somewhere in my song,
Has paths I can walk, when I wake, to good

Or evil: to the cage, to the oven, to the House
In the Wood. It is a part of life, or of the story

We make of life. But after the last leaf,
The last light — for each year is leafless,

Each day lightless, at the last — the wood begins
Its serious existence: it has no path,

No house, no story; it resists comparison . . .
One clear, repeated, lapping gurgle, like a spoon

Or a glass breathing, is the brook,
The wood's fouled midnight water. If I walk into the wood

As far as I can walk, I come to my own door,
The door of the House in the Wood. It opens silently:

On the bed is something covered, something humped
Asleep there, awake there — but what? I do not know.

I look, I lie there, and yet I do not know.
How far out my great echoing clumsy limbs

Stretch, surrounded only by space! For time has struck,
All the clocks are stuck now, for how many lives,

On the same second. Numbed, wooden, motionless,
We are far under the surface of the night.

Nothing comes down so deep but sound: a car, freight cars,
A high soft droning, drawn out like a wire

Forever and ever — is this the sound that Bunyan heard
So that he thought his bowels would burst within him? —

Drift on, on, into nothing. Then someone screams
A scream like an old knife sharpened into nothing.

It is only a nightmare. No one wakes up, nothing happens,
Except there is gooseflesh over my whole body —

And that too, after a little while, is gone.
I lie here like a cut-off limb, the stump the limb has left . . .

Here at the bottom of the world, what was before the world
And will be after, holds me to its black

Breasts and rocks me: the oven is cold, the cage is empty,
In the House in the Wood, the witch and her child sleep.

David Walker

THE SHAPE ON THE BED

If Randall Jarrell was, as Robert Lowell claimed, the most heartbreaking poet of his generation, surely one crucial reason was his treatment of childhood. In many of his poems, of course, we hear children speaking: from the longing for the unknown in "A Sick Child" through the somber, spectral duet of "Protocols" to the lyric memoir of a boyhood in Hollywood, that irrecoverable Eden, in "The Lost World," Jarrell's work is pervaded by children, most of them isolated and unhappy. Indeed, these lines from "Childhood" (adapted from Rilke), might well stand as emblematic: "O loneliness, O leaden waiting-out of time. . . . // O knowledge ever harder to hold fast to,/ O dread, O burden." And yet these poems are not unremittingly gloomy; their voices, never flatly melancholy, tend rather to be precise, solemn, poignantly innocent — in fact, much like that of the careful, precocious, alert boy I imagine the young Jarrell to have been. It is the way in which the poems' profound sadness is tempered by the vitality of their observations and language — the way, in short, the children are made authentic rather than simply emblematic — that gives them their richly distinctive tonality.

I find it particularly interesting how often these same tonalities emerge in the voices of Jarrell's adult speakers, how often — whether through the shock of warfare or through the ordinary traumas of loss and aging — they seem stunned into simply *registering* the facts of their lives in a characteristically childlike way. Many of Jarrell's adults are perpetually moving from innocence to experience, viewing their lives as an endless rite of passage. The result, particularly in the late poems, is that the distinction between childhood and adulthood dissolves, both as a dramatic element in the poem and in the reading experience. We might notice, for instance, that "A Hunt in the Black Forest," in Jarrell's last volume, is apparently a reworking of the briefer and much earlier "The Prince." Both are poems of considerable compression and power. But while "The Prince" resolves itself fairly easily as a narrative of a child's nightmare about his dead father, it is

never clear whether the "dreamer" of the later poem is child or adult, or indeed whether the poem's events are dreamed or actually experienced. The pathos of "The Prince" develops when we recognize that its speaker is a child who understands less about his experience than we can. "The Hunt in the Black Forest" is considerably more tangled and phantasmagoric; although its murky narrative of hunter, mute, and dwarf draws on the child's world of folktale and magic adventure, there seems to be no way for either "dreamer" or reader to get outside it, to attain the "adult" perspective that would allow us to account for it more easily. To read the poem is to claim that world as our own.

"The House in the Wood," a companion poem, is equally mysterious and multilayered, and to my mind even more effective. Its title implies that the poem may center on a fairly conventional narrative, and a certain rationality may be suggested, at least subliminally, by the regular appearance of couplets on the page. But these early expectations are soon subverted: the poem is in fact deeply intuitive, irrational, and unpredictable. Jarrell had earlier written poems grounded in traditional folktales ("The Black Swan," "The Sleeping Beauty: Variation of the Prince," "Cinderella"), and the story of Hansel and Gretel clearly underlies "The House in the Wood." But only very superficially: to recognize the model is merely to see how radically Jarrell departs from it. Plot, character, symbol, narrative perspective — all are subordinated to the play of images on the edge of consciousness, to the drift of dream-discovery. Hansel and Gretel are collapsed into a single subject who somehow seems to speak universally ("It is a part of life, or of the story/ We make of life"), and whose voice plays in the uncertain territory between child and adult. What at first may seem the characteristically innocent precision of Jarrell's children ("At the back of the houses there is the wood") soon begins to reflect a more mature, reflective sensibility ("each year is leafless,/ Each day lightless, at the last"), and we recognize that it may simply represent the flat, uncritical voice in which we narrate our dreams.

But such a simple formulation is finally false to the poem.

The experience of reading "The House in the Wood" does not easily allow the sort of distance that is necessary to talk critically about it. Like the wood, the poem itself "has no path,/ No house, no story; it resists comparison. . . ." To read it analytically according to the codes of Freud or Jung would be no more effective than Hansel's trail of breadcrumbs. From the point when the speaker leaves civilization behind and plunges into darkness, we are forced to make our own dream-discoveries, and I suspect every reader's will be different. We become the landscape, the landscape becomes a mirror, and the house I find in the wood belongs not to the witch but to me. This is only one of the poem's manifold surprises, and it is followed by an even greater one:

> On the bed is something covered, something humped
> Asleep there, awake there — but what? I do not know.
>
> I look, I lie there, and yet I do not know.
> How far out my great echoing clumsy limbs
>
> Stretch, surrounded only by space! For time has struck,
> All the clocks are stuck now, for how many lives,
>
> On the same second. Numbed, wooden, motionless,
> We are far under the surface of the night.

At this point the Hansel-and-Gretel narrative has been left far behind, and the metamorphosis becomes dazzlingly circular: the hidden, sinister object on the bed becomes oneself asleep there, dreaming the object. The solipsistic implications of the disappearance of character and plot from the narrative come relentlessly and terrifyingly into focus. The excursion "as far as I can walk" into the wood leads inevitably to "nothing," and the triple repetition of the word within three lines gives it its necessary weight. The recognition that "it is only a nightmare" provides no comfort at all, easing as it does the passage to utter passivity, unconsciousness, silence: "No one wakes up, nothing happens,/

Except there is gooseflesh over my whole body — // And that too, after a little while, is gone."

The poem's ending unfolds a series of quite wonderful surprises:

> Here at the bottom of the world, what was before the world
> And will be after, holds me to its black
>
> Breasts and rocks me; the oven is cold, the cage is empty,
> In the House in the Wood, the witch and her child sleep.

The first couplet seems to take us deeper into the abstract, almost purely metaphysical limbo of space and time that was promised us earlier: we appear to have entered an absence that is both pre-historic and post-holocaust. And yet there is something peculiar about the syntax: it may take a moment to realize that what "holds me" is in fact that absence, that limbo that existed before the world. And as we cross the line break — surely one of the most powerfully dislocating line breaks I know — and the blackness suddenly becomes "breasts," absence becomes presence and narrative boldly reenters the poem, but radically transformed. There *is* a witch, there *is* an oven, but here they are far from simply fearful. The other presence that has finally entered the poem is nurturing, calming, rocking us as the poem's rhythms have begun to. The simplicity of the final clause, suspending the identities of witch and child until the last possible moment, is the ultimate measure of Jarrell's control. All the predictable distinctions — time and space, day and night, good and evil, past and future, witch and mother, adult and child — are erased in a vision of profound emotional ambivalence. As in "A Hunt in the Black Forest," this vision is so compelling, so elemental, as to make rational critical distance virtually impossible. "We are all children to the past," Jarrell says in "The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln"; here with extraordinary power he makes us all that child, rocked and sleeping.

CELLAR STAIRS

It's rickety down to the dark.
Old skates, long-bladed, hang by leather laces
on your left and want to slash your throat
but can't, they can't, being only skates.
On a shelf above, tools: shears,
three-prong weed hacker, ice pick,
poison — rats and bugs — and on the landing
half way down, a keg of roofing nails
you don't want to fall face first into,

no you don't. To your right,
a fuse box with its side switch — a slot machine,
on a good day, or the one the warden pulls,
on a bad. Against the wall,
on nearly every stair, one boot, no two
together, no pair, as if the dead
went off limping to where they go,
which is down these steps,
where sits, at the bottom, a swollen,

humming, huge, white freezer
big enough for many bodies,
of children, at least. And this
is where you're sent each night
for the frozen bag of beans
or peas or broccoli
that lie beside the slab
of meat you eat for dinner,
each countless childhood one your last.

BODO

"History is largely made up of Bodos."
— Eileen Power, *Medieval People*

We could weep for him
but we won't: the man
who scythed and ground the oats
but ate no bread; who pumped one oar
among thousands at Lepanto — ocean
up to his clavicles and rising, who
in countless numbers, was food
for countless fish. The man,
or sometimes woman, three or four rows back
in a crowd (listless, slack-mouthed)
lining a street when an army,
depleted or fat with loot, came home;
or the man behind such columns
gathering the dung
to sell, or to pick for seeds. All the pig-farmers,
rat-catchers, charcoal-burners, tanners
in their stink, root-diggers living
in the next village over from the smallest village;
who thickened their soup with sawdust
or meal gathered from dirt
around the grindstone.
Your great, great, etc. Uncle Fedor who never spoke
to great, great, etc. Aunt Berthe
but in grunts, who beat his spavined horse,
who beat his rented field
for millet, sorghum, who ate a chicken
once a year, who could not read
nor even sign an X; the slaves
innumerable who never made it
to the slavers, buzzards' bait,

or did not survive the crossing
if they did. All the Bodos
who stood on docks with breaking backs
and did not wave
and did not know Marco Polo
was setting out again; the zealous priest
eleventh on the list
to seek out Prester John; the convict-colonists
who preferred the gaol at home
but had no choice. The slug-pickers;
who bailed the bilge-water
hanging by their heels; the doughboy
dead of typhus before he wrote a letter home;
the man who thought he pleased a minor Nazi
with an act of servility
and was proud and told his wife and son;
who lost a leg and half his face for his king,
was cheated on his pension,
and was not bitter. The man,
the woman, who hung
or burned for nothing
and did not weep, or tortured, confessed
too fast for less; who praised his slop
in which a fish head floated. . . .

EASTER

Angel at the slaughterhouse,
Your long black Hasidic overcoat
Trailing the ground;
The stray dogs eyeing you suspiciously.

The rat with a cigar
Interrupting his work.
You putting the bloody head of a horse
On your shoulders,

Studying yourself in a thin knife —
(The one with black seams in her stockings
Wiped it clean just now on her tight skirt),
In a field of many carcasses,

Rusty engines blown lightbulbs old tires
Filthy rags angrily thrown —
Which must be like veronicas
If we knew how to read them.

THE IMPLEMENTS OF AUGURY

for Ljubinka

Something like an empty chair and table
In a fortune teller's storefront.
The Madame herself withdrawn from view,
Leaving us the dimly lit lampshade . . .

Most certainly, bequesting to our care:
The empty street, the late hour,
The flowered tablecloth with tassels,
A neat pack of cards face down

In a huge night-bound city
Of many churches, hospitals,
Prisons and high tribunals
All equally deserted now.

The Madame herself withdrawn from view.
The cards as they were. The lampshade
With its flying mermaids and dragons,
The smiling mermaids, the fire-spitting dragons.

THE MARVELS OF THE CITY

for Bata

I went down the tree-lined street of false gods
The cobbled street of two wise monkeys
The street of roasted nightingales
The small twisted street of the insomniacs
The street of those who feather their beds
That's right the street of the dog's metaphysics
The dark alley of the Emperor's favorite barber
With its fountain and stone lion
The closed shutters on the street of the hundred year old
harlot
The flag-bedecked courthouses and banks
On the square of the betrayed revolution

Here at last I thought feeling a rush of blood
The street of eternal recurrence and its proof
The tavern at the sign of the Pig and the Seraphim
Erudite salamanders sipping wine of arctic vintage
Hamlet's wine the wine of stargazers
Loveless couples the wine of idiot savants

We are solely of the mind said one
Beyond Good and Evil said another
But the waiters, black hair growing out of their ears
Just took our orders and said nothing

BLOCKSTARKEN

A visitor to Germany recalled reading the word, Blockstarken, in the print of an old poster. She later learned there is no such word in the German language.

They must have taken our breath with them,
these words, now no more than the substance of feathers,
husks of decrepit objects, dust you find in the crack of a leaf.
Some, longer than was necessary, over the earth with their
shadows,
curved precisely and were never seen again.

I suppose this is why we sometimes stop, look at the ground
while talking, and why we'll need to talk louder as we go on,
why the trees appear to hang there, inhaling it all:
what we are saying, what we are not saying as the Blocks
darken.
Inside the snowflake right now

languishing, wet, falling slowly,
must be bits of old, lost conversation:
two people on stools near the window, their lips moving,
hands folded humbly under the table,
or their hands moving like white fires. And probably

what they are saying is what they will be saying
as the breath goes out of them, before they've agreed on
anything,
before the soup comes. Who can say, maybe we're surrounded
by a music that remembers us. I don't know.
I'm washing glasses and I get this word stuck inside my head

that was buried in Germany like the jaw of the last man
to say it and now he could very well be singing
through the hollow wine glass as I let my finger slide
cryptically around the rim. Blocks darken. Blocks darken

but only in my own language. The single word for snow
collects in the black notch of the single word for tree
and out in the white shade a weathervane's tin scales
start moving. Now a small gust is talking. Now something
    other

than the rust it has become keeps it together, keeps it up
like a solitary partner waltzing. Tipping each wine glass
upside down, I think, this could be my mother in me
or just boredom

but I find myself singing this word
immersed in its delicate nonsense. I find myself
lining the glasses up while singing
as if to keep my place in the universe in place.

IN FAVOR OF LIGHTNING

Nothing I've seen is like this
lightning as it drops to its hands
over a quiet barn
releasing its brief self in spasms.

Behind it, nothing. A cool night,
an occasional house drifts past. Tomorrow that house,
this air, these weeds will not appear stricken.
But I don't want to think

about tomorrow.
I would rather watch these trees
flash and spring forward
with the kind of fleeting, impetuous nerve
we manage only once or twice
our whole lives.

There is no one for miles.
There never was, and north and south
are confused by that long strand of light
overtaking the sky by shivering through itself.
There is fear that, like rain, sounds human

but has no voice. Not mine or yours
and not the voice of someone
who loves us. Fear like a white streak
coming from behind to enter the mirror
or those dashes in the road
which erase longevity.

How transparent lightning makes everything!
The rigid fence, the blind moths
that crash like seconds
against the windshield.
I can see myself

there where lightning
dies of brilliance
over a sudden pond.

ON THE PORCH IN THE EVENING

You can't pet them. These are the ones
the fields kept — burrs, infestations, sores
near their eyes. They'll work their teeth over
birds they've crippled, snatch what moves
in the air. The tiniest death inspires them.

Why do you listen? Tonight they'll only hurt
one another. They carry the hatred of their own
species, clear as the marble of each eye, but
they're not committed. They go at it
like school children. You listen,

braced underneath the exposed wire. You try
to separate the slope of dark from the lawn's edge,
their weight from stumps, muscular outlines.
You think only an extrovert could conceive of them,
the way a boy might load one up with a firecracker,

then stand back as it grows inflated, arched
to where it will burst and scatter its teased fur.
They look like that now, spraying first, knowing
only that they will mate or fight, sometimes
in the crawl space, sometimes the ghosted garden

and never pretty, the one crouched rigid as a saint
where the other is clumsy for all its machinery.
Often one will dig in the middle of it, a sane act,
a private act, a need you can almost understand
as you almost hear speech in their plaintive sulking,

or think in your own dreams how a reptile is folding.
When it's over they slant away, the distacted tails
your only marker for having seen them. Why do you do it?
You go down with a pan of warm milk, place it in that spot
on the grass where the ground is cold

and think how it must have hurt, how at least
they'd be hungry. If you stand under the moon like the curator
of something — What is it?

HEIRLOOM

That evening, the blackbird landed
on our roof again. Packaged in its small bones
was the same moment
and a cool song that turned, "what if,
what if, what if," until I had to look up again
to see how it perched, slick in its folds,
delicate breast tilted like the afternoon's ornament.

Again, I thought how it would fit inside my palm
and feel as good there as money.
I could imagine it, stealing up to the roof
and being that close which was terrifying.
I love you someone says into space
and everything outside that voice is changed —

I think this is the story. The blackbird
came here, absorbed in its birdhood
and the stars came one by one, sealed
in their beauty. And it wasn't enough
to be haunted by them, either. Or to haunt.
It was cruel. Time inside flowers and all that.

Black bird, violet sky, if god put perfection
inside you, who put our bones inside jealousy?
Such confusion, as if I'd lost you
and now you'll cause nothing but grief.
Today the relatives aren't speaking.
You are the reason, the first heirloom, a death
to be gathered around and divided between us.

But wasn't this always the story,
long before you came here,
about how love was given over,
handed down in unequal shares.

THE DANGER IS,

the scientists can't proceed
without one of the dogs spotting them
and calling, calling a syllable
of clipped and loud appeal,
without the animal throwing itself
against the chainlink wall.
Through the vets' binoculars
it wags an indefatigable tail,
which seems to propel the others —
three acres of beagles racing,
reversing, grinding down
the runways in their cells.

They stir up drafts and eddies
in the strontium 90
they are meant to be changed by.
The doctors they're so pleased with
are returning empty-sacked
hours after the emergency call
to their raptor center —
they've been out scouting
for the hurt hawk all this time,
through wintering tomato fields,
down in creekbank brush as gold
and scratched as an old wedding ring.

I stand in the background
in the honeycombed darning-eggs
of teasel on its spiny bract-nests.
I couldn't help it; I have experimented
with the lives of those I loved.
They couldn't help
but do so too.
The pods, some haired or parchment,
bless their outgoing lineage,

however dispersed and muddied.
I am watching for something lovely,
anything in the blithe and hazardous air
the unadoptable dogs
will not be disappointed by.

The bird surgeons skirt
and disappoint the dogs.
To reach where danger ends
the people need to disappear
into the care facility next door,
between the corral of hard little goats
and the ordinary panicked
bray of the experimental mules.
And soon, as the doctors trusted,
the tirade of hopeful seeing dims
until the beagles shut entirely up
and send a hush across the lowlands
of unfound hawks.

I still listen. I don't trust.
But not a single animal whines
of all these souls in the hands of researchers

in this land of souls
waiting
for the hands of searchers.

LETTER RESEMBLING THINGS

— From my family I came by a miner's wedge
of pink dolomite crystals
and kept it because their translucence
resembles the wolf eel's teeth,
that disintegrating animal we stood before
for hours in the tourist aquarium's
curtained-off and light-failed hollow,
bloodstars climbing
through convivial, uncharismatic algaes
busy blotting out the only other windows.
It was wrong to trap the years in there
while the eels grew senior,
their cheeks ever more agar-agar,
in this pitiless show business.

In a mineral shop I've retreated to,
a boy, Ahmal, tends his father's business,
tries to sell me drusy honey-yellow
crusts of adamite, green calcite
windowing from lime-soda feldspar,
crystals closing gates in the earth with glass.
Nothing closes off in heaven,
but there's no place to put things either.
So I buy nothing yet.
Tomorrow I'll try Marty's Fossils,
but today there were picketers
accusing him of Satanism —
"There's no such thing as fossils;
the earth can't be that old."
One struck him in the stomach with her sign;
another attacked his dinosaur bone . . .

A beat and formal poet says,
"If to die is to move
from the ugliness of this world,
then let it be."
But what becomes of the curious
when they die? Say, those who want to see
how atoms are comfortable?
And why does no transcendent world
detail itself in either life,
transcribe its mystical congressional record?
You'd think every day's
heavy tax on the ecstatic
should pay for it.

For instance, I heard Marty shout —
"I just want to show you that the earth is beautiful."
I see him as appellant
for all resembling things, exquisite, ugly,
and miraculous,
even for our eel,
her head so soft a crab is cushioned in it.
Advocate even of her bite
(forestalled when it could crush the sharp crab)
which also looks like rose quartz,
beryl with blowzy impurities,
or palest zoisite.

to Walter Pavlich

John Woods

THING LOVE

("The the." — Wallace Stevens)

No one wants to be something left behind
by the movers: a doll head, crayon, cuff link.
No one wants to be the blank square in the album
with the little corner doilies.
An earnest savior with the dark suit required
by Gideonic Law came to me and said
that love of Jesus would put me in the big picture.
All I had in my hand was a wet paint brush.

I have noticed the sickle moon at my nail quick.
I follow her down dead ends: gravity,
inertia, beta decay, the immune system,
all the imperatives that one cannot put a face to.
I love Newton as much as anyone,
but I would not kiss into his beard
for falling privilege.

Gather me up, Tao, in the great arm of community!
No one wants to be a dried-up jar of fingerpaint.
Laotzu rode off on his donkey, and no one knows
what he shouted back.

I have not meant anything more
than other falling objects, gene-driven,
the sparkling romp of appetites,
so I am forced back to the genuine article.

Even a stone may become Buddha. Come, things,
you know your names.

THE KARMA CYCLE

Fated to be a bug: Karma Ghia.
Fated to be sung loudly: Karman.
Fated to wear fruit: Karma Miranda.
Fated to spout flame in a tux: Karma Dragon.
Fated to stick to it: Karma Apple.
Fated to take penicillin: Karmarrhea.
Fated to drown in Bavaria: Bad Karma.

THE RELIGION OF SNOW

Over at the Institute, he puts down
his manuscript, *Moral Calculus*, and grabs high on his nose
in the way actors have taught us they're tired.

Up in Minnesota, the phones ring into the evening:
where is our thinker? I woke today
not knowing which side of my brain
was male or female or reptile.
The answer? *At the beep. . . .*

This winter, snow swirled and never touched the ground.
Tractor ruts froze black and glossy
in the orchards, dipping with ghost apples.

My neighbor's white cat and black Labrador
disappear on their curious errands,
understanding between them
all of Eastern thought.

A MILD CHRISTMAS

1

She has sorted out
all the edge pieces
of the jigsaw puzzle.

2

Fathers are installing trains.
They are building highways at night
and pulling their children home,
up and down the sides of hills.

3

Since dawn she has been driving
south over old mountain tops.
Light creeps into the valleys.
It is the first time she has
seen the world. The first time.

4

For Christmas her mother sent money.
She'll buy an August colored coat
and wrap up, warm, in its arms.

5

This ring is yours now,
grandmother said. They hug
just once to see her through.

6

Thick fog.
She has to borrow boots.
There are pigs in the pen,

good pigs. When she goes
someplace she loses everything
that isn't there. Halfway
back, a bell begins to sound.

7

Behold, says the psalmist,
the eye of the Lord is upon
those who fear him,
those who wait upon his love.

8

Uncle Fred's very ill.
How her bitterness dissolves
in farming country, where
death's not ominous, just is.

9

Joe, when she met him, said
Words don't let things be
as much. He had a quiet look
that saw things better.

10

Again and again Lord, you
destroy the loneliness
we call sanity.

There's an old spring in the woods.

Look on us now.

FALLING: THE FIRST TIME

The people — watching him like a parade.
Not now, in those days. They're used to men
carrying crosses through the streets,
but this one stumbles at the start,
his back buckling, knees going limp.
Who'd guess the memory of a kiss?

— Men with ropes and knives,
their faces twitching. Judas
came from behind and Jesus
leaned back into that kiss
like a girl her first time.

They say falling in love is
wonderful. Falling, you don't
fall out of love. You stay in,
swaying, while love flows from
you, leaves your limbs slack
like the arms of a healer
and the mob, up for a fool
or pretender, draws back,
stunned, not yet ready
to see you so weak.

Marianne Boruch

ANGELS

The boy empties the library when he leaves it
pushing in his chair, not a crumb of eraser behind
not a splinter of pencil. I bury my head
in the entry for snow, the *Britannica*, volume Sn-St
thinking: what use is memory
thinking: of course he's an angel
thinking: he will not know it for a great long time.

Old cars. Computers. Then girls.
His heart will stop
a thousand afternoons, the light
half perfect in the television pulse
all that inertia plugged in and blaring
until everything narrows to the sexual instant.

I know he's an angel
like I know certain clouds
new to the neighborhood whose shapes
startle us and shame us with their beauty
moving forward on our lifetimes
with their grand so what.

Then his undershirt, off white
so badly worn, it cries out
like a devoted younger brother. I hear it
clearly from here, deep into this paragraph, grief-winged
and wet and boring: *slush*
its whereabouts uncertain, its ambition
amounting, frankly, to nothing — winter
past the brink into a blotchy cranky child. I keep

reading. He is walking by. For to notice him
is to change him. Angels
know the eyes begin deep within the brain, which
is never human. For centuries, they
have been here, and they call
our thawed life a figure of speech,
onomatopeia, a fake.

RAISING LUMBER

Houses in that weather rose up
like brand new dice flung absently
after midnight. We turned the days
in crisp blue shorts. Irons awkward on their boards
hissed like insects, searing linen
behind the driveways, the half-grown trees.

My mother planted crabapple, small knobby things
a luminous flowering in awful wet springs,
pink or white in daylight, after dark
no color at all but thin moody trembling
over the yard. My brother left us
for the basement, grinding his telescope mirror
like a mantra. Chemicals festered above the cracked
concrete. Everything slanted

toward the drain where a fishhook descended, "just
in case." Just in case, I repeated into
litany for weeks, as the wire
looped and grew dusty, and nothing
from the inner planet stirred. So stones

turned ancestor, or anyone
in sleep. Those afternoons I stood, an eye
in the needle, out toward the yard. Next door,
Frankie Corea continued pounding out a treehouse
from his father's shed, ripping up then
raising lumber, as if some ancient tomb
were opened, and once opened, robbed
half with delight, half dread.

THE DOCTOR FAR FROM HOME

At the auction, several men are dying of cancer.
Not six months, says my friend
as we stand in the rear of the place
holding back our bids. An old man
suddenly rises, his face
alert and spectral as a sliver of moon.
He nods and smiles. My friend waves back happily
as if there were reason.

You could be wrong, I say
walking through the cold parking lot, past
the pick-ups and the beat up Fords.
He shrugs, as though, yes, he could misplace
a scarf, even an expensive one.

At our house, his wife is saying: I can't go to him
for my problem. He can't bear to examine me.
We're drinking beer, waiting
for the roast, for potatoes to soften.
On the porch, my husband hoists
our son, spinning him wildly on faded linoleum.
Through the window, we watch them.

LIGHT

— after Edward Hopper

which was not thought, but the airless stare
furrowing its welcome like the inevitable hot
misery of summer. We step in
and out of it. We watch it flood the porch, slice down
hard, windows onto floors. The cat crosses,
flares up in angles. And always
someone doing nothing in it. So far away
is darkness, its busy cool imaginings
under stone or brick
or think, darkness for years
under the Federalist house. No mural inside
can draw that splendid inkwell
up, although the mural weeps where boats
pretend to anchor, and harbor narrows
two centuries against the impending mob. Distance,
until a man is a drop of paint, a child
bare gem of color, chipped now
some other shape rages, unimaginable toy.
What I wanted, Hopper wrote, *was to paint*
sunlight on the side of a house.
But they sleepwalked
for him, their faces beamed up like ice floes, men
and women stunned by circumstance, vacant
as moons. Here
a man on the side of the bed
wakes to nothing. Here a woman floats, dim sentry
at the great bay window. Was it a fine
viciousness, or kindness
that did this? Even the sea is stilled,
its blue the blue
of an eye that will neither waver nor blink
nor recognize in the light, a source of light.

TEXAS AUBADE

The bluebonnets, paintbrushes, evening primrose,
the solid roll of the Zephyr, two whistles, trailing
smoke above the far wood, the nickel
on the track wide as a dollar, the straining plenum
of the udder witholding its drip, the calf who called
all night in the pasture, who was called
by its mother, both feigning confusion in an eternal
game of keep away, the blue spruce mist of late March,
sun coming on like that brush fire of Lucian's

which spanned a football field; and the witness,
and the assist of — Lee who seemed permanent,
bark on the tree, who sat for years on the same
barstool, third from the left; Jim, wounded
in the war, whose arm still bled; Lois with her
battery-operated fan; Benito who worked for
the railroad. All prove what nobody denies.
And the cattle munching coastal bermuda are so.
They scratch mightily against the fence.

And Carl who sang in a band, who when any
band played — country, bohemian, czech — wanted
to sing Bill Bailey. His voice and their voices
double in the tumble of hill and wildflower,
dramatic reds and oranges and blues; and green,
for simplicity. How steadily it moves,
the shadow over the grass.
How intricate the play of light and shadow.
How each leaf is less, each pull of the grass.

MOZART'S STARLING

We can't be sure. Did Mozart
learn the theme from his starling?
Or the other way around?

I side with the maestro.
That damn 17th is too complex
for a single bird, and it's too

much for the Czech band which is
tuning up inside a dome in Milano,
Texas where the ceiling was

lowered and the walls covered
with paneling. The old dentist
"Doc" Kruse shows up with his young

72 year old girl and they polka
under the rickety ceiling fans
which also hold light, permitting

a pale bluster. Too much, maybe,
for a bird. And what about the crow
which arrives every year for the next

seven and sits on a fence post which
has been recently painted, first
with aluminum primer, then

with a whiter white than I can imagine,
just to rest for a pretty minute?
The music says to take my wine

outside and look up at the stars
which fall just now, two at once,
in private arrangement.

It says try and tell the truth,
if it's interesting.

STILL LIVES

Horn of the stuffed rhinoceros,
dull sheen of his hide, marble shine
of his eyes, black hole
back of his stiff lips.

Sea lions, killer whales
half above the solid water. Tortoises
almost on the bank, plasticine
palm trees, painted mountains, perpetual

nightfull over Minnesota, blue snow
falling from morning to evening, always
the same dim light, always the grey wolf
leaping toward the glass which divides us.

THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM

You are old as the storm.
October knows you.

Fish in the harbor of sleep
swim through your name.

You are the North Star.
You are the boulder

no one has seen.
You are the moss.

Your birth is an icon
nailed to a plaster wall.

Your birth is a garden
black as the apocalypse.

* * *

Alarm clocks ring
in the Valley of Clouds.

No one gets up.
In the Hotel of Stars

there are many vacancies
always:

a marching band
at dawn, on some other street,

acorns and maple leaves
falling, falling

past the black dog
and the factory,

past the cathedral,
past its ruins,

past the night watchman
asleep in his guard booth.

You are sleeping too
outside your house.

It's drizzling.
Your reading lamp is on.

CHILDHOOD

Branched, dove-lit,
Magenta, ossified, fossilized,
Malachite and conglomerate, hidden,
Up-turned, sometimes, dried,

Burnt sienna and hard to believe,
Acorn Paradise, brown-barked:
Now's burial ground, Memory's hair
Braided there in the grave,

Dogrun solstice, leafage
Small, enclosed, searched through and raked
Between stepping stones, statues
To exhaustion . . . China, far away,

The miniature spade, hacked roots, hoed
Dirt, the promised hole.

WHAT THEY TOLD THE CHILD

The child wanted them to go away.
All of them, the daily visitors, uncles
and aunts, with their sunken heads and
milk chocolate. And. There won't be
a second summer, no one can lie in bed
from one summer to the next that thin.
One summer, then another. No, that's
not summer, you know it's not.

The path to the bed's forever. Flowers
on the table, the child at the window
wanting to wave, stops the motion, runs
from the room, down the stairs, across
the gravel, to the shade of the linden.

They lift the man from the car, bring him
upstairs. Wait here, they tell the child.

GRADUALLY

Afternoon storm. High or low pressure coming.
A reason for conditions: climatic, psychic.
Weather makes you tired, telephone's ringing
in regular intervals. Someone's painting, with
my paints I bet. Stop it, stop it right away!
But the world won't be still, even if you look
at sleeping children. Courage, keep your chin up.

Steps in the hallway. All quiet at 10 P.M. House
rules, and for days the rotten feeling just before
you fall asleep. How late is it anyway? As if someone
were in the room. Or water springs, and radiation.
My dowsing rod was silvery. An heirloom. From a
famous uncle, they said he came from China.

And that package from Switzerland. The people
were probably nice, meant well. Wonder what they
thought? Can't say. Each word had its own place.
No, we won't see each other again, is that what
we say? With a package over the border, without
any words at all. No time for speculation.
That's it: time for.

Light rippling on the pane. Wind raining against.

translated by Stuart Friebert

FRANCESCO AND CLARE

It was there, in the little town
On top of the mountain, they walked,
Francesco and Chiara,
That's who they were, that's what
They told themselves — a joke, their joke
About two saints, failed lovers held apart
From the world of flesh, Francis and Clare,
Out walking the old city, two saints,
Sainted ones, holy, held close to the life . . .
Poverty, the pure life, the one
Life for Franzikus and Klara,
Stalwarts given
To the joys of God in heaven
And on earth, Mother, praising Brother Sun
And Sister Moon; twin saints, unified
In their beauty as one, Francisco and Clara,
A beauty said of God's will and word, bestowed
And polished by poverty, François
With Claire, the chosen poverty, the true
Poverty that would not be their lives . . .
And they took their favorite names, Clare and Francesco,
Walking the streets of stone the true saints
Walked, watching as the larks swirled
Above the serene towers, the larks
Francesco once described as the color
Of goodness, that is, of the earth, of the dead . . .
Larks who'd not seek for themselves any extravagant
Plumage, humble and simple, God's birds
Twirling and twisting up the pillowing air . . .
And Francesco said to Claire, *Oh little plant I love,*
My eyes are almost blind with Brother Sun . . . tell me,
Who hides inside God's time . . . ?
And Clare, rock of all Poor Clares, stood
In the warm piazza overlooking the valley, weary,
Her shoulder bag sagging from the weight

Of her maps and books, and said across the rain-slick
Asphalt of the parking lot, to the poor bird climbing
The wheel of sky it always had loved best,
Dear lark, dear saint, all my kisses on your nest!

(Assisi)

THE LAKE

At the point of land
That tipped farthest into the lake,
A promontory of ruins and rock, they sat,
Slicing fruit and waving to the Sunday boaters
Zooming over the water in little speedsters.
On the next point: the old villa
Of Catullus, its massive walls and stairways, stables
And baths. It was nice to think of him there,
Walking the narrow beaches below the villa
Where the cafe was now, where
The woman behind the bar was yelling
Down to her son, chubby in his nylon trunks
And asleep on the sand, a towel only partly
Wrapped around him. Catullus would like her,
Yelling like that, just as he'd like the young man
Leading his pregnant wife and three daughters
Step by step over the rocks, into the water,
To the wide, flat jetty where they stand laughing
As the mild waves run up to wash their feet . . .
And why *should* Catullus go back
To the city, just to watch Lesbia rattle her purse?
Why not stay here by the lake, where her letters
Could be answered leisurely and with the proper venom?
Catullus closed his eyes, imaging the weight
Of her breasts in his hands . . .
Just as the boaters passed, she turned, handing
Over the knife. As he sliced the blood orange, its
Juice ran out around the blade, over his fingers,
Over the rocks and gravel. She leaned
Over to kiss his ear. And the whirr of the motors
Out on the lake was like the roar of bees
To the flowers just opening their damp petals again
After the sudden curtain-fall of a summer's rain . . .

(Sirmione)

SWIMMING

The door is locked so I ask the maid. She looks
submerged in her duties. Later the same maid
has a washcloth for the icecubes I carry
up to my floor.

The door unlocks and a young man in a swimsuit
leads me to the pool area. I clutch
my suit and towel. I fail to believe

in the locker area marked WOMEN
at the top tier of graduated steps, grills, chairs.
I fail to believe
in Nude Descending the Stair.

Below are other lockers, other mirrors
easy to approve. Reflections narrow to slender.

I step out. And wave to the young man who I see
now is the lifeguard. All this takes forever.
It takes longer than forever for the lifeguard
to circle the pool, tell me where to leave
the wristwatch, room key, and eyeglasses.

I sit on the high edge on cool tile and leave
my towel. I drop into the water.
I cannot remember the last time this happened.

The lane is mine, I swim through fuzzy decor,
molded masonry, chandelier ceiling, stained glass
in primary colors. I suspend the world,
the grave is forever denied.

After, my center circulates,
all the bloodiness has eased and ended.

The capillaries just at the skin
are small lights flashing.

I lie down and sleep.

O-BON: DANCE FOR THE DEAD

I have no memories or photograph of my father
coming home from war, thin as a caneworker,
a splinter of flesh in his olive greens
and khakis and spit-shined G.I. shoes;

Or of my grandfather in his flower-print shirt,
humming his bar-tunes, tying the bandana
to his head to hold the sweat back from his face
as he bent to weed and hoe the garden that Sunday
while swarms of planes maneuvered overhead.

I have no memories of the radio that day
or the clatter of machetes in the Filipino camp,
the long wail of news from over the mountains,
or the glimmerings and sheaths of fear in the village.

I have no story to tell about lacquer shrines
or filial ashes, about a small brass bell,
and incense smoldering in jade bowls, about the silvered,
black face of Miroku gleaming with detachment,
anthurium crowns in the stoneware vase
the hearts and wheels of fire behind her.

And though I've mapped and studied the strike march
from the North Shore to town in 1921, though I've
sung psalms at festival and dipped the bamboo cup
in the stone bowl on the Day of the Dead,
though I've pitched coins and took my turn
at the *taiko* drum, and folded paper fortunes
and strung them on the graveyard's *hala* tree;

Though I've made a life and raised my house
oceans east of my birth, though I've craned
my neck and cocked my ear for the sound of flute
and *shamisen* jangling its tune of woe —

The music nonetheless echoes in its slotted box,
the cold sea chafes the land and swirls over gravestones,
and wind sighs its passionless song through ironwood trees.

More than memory or the image of the slant of grey rain
pounding the thatch coats and peaked hats
of townsmen racing across the blond arch of a bridge,
more than the past and its aches and brocade
of tales and ritual, its dry mouth of repetition,

I want the cold stone in my hand to pound the earth,
I want the splash of cool or steaming water to wash my feet,
I want the dead beside me when I dance, to help me
flesh the notes of my song, to tell me it's all right.

FATHER

That he will come
  With a golden
Cone,
  That wedge of light
At the door's jamb,
  Is a given.

He carries water,
  The elemental
Desire which conforms
  To the shape
Of whatever it is
  You don't have —

Lights on,
  Or the bubbles of talk
From the party
  Downstairs bursting
Against your bed —
  But the drink

Undoes the spell.
  Tricked
By the body, you're
  Drawn closer
To the dark ledge
  And he is gone.

FAITH

Although what shimmers
  in this corridor
mile after white
  mile
is only a short
  in the fluorescent
tubes,
  and what sounds
like celestial choruses
  is pneumatic doors
sucking the air
  in and out,
something about the light
  and music
of this hospital
  is beautiful.
We smile
  because we're not here
for anything serious
  and because everything
about our child,
  who is quiet but
not yet serious,
  makes us smile.
His gown, the color
  of fluorocarbons
or bluish milk and too
  large, billows
around him like a wave
  or vacation sail,
as if the gurney were afloat
  and carrying him
toward sound.
  Vibration, which will
become sound, spends

itself against him,
against the glut
at the bone wall;
only the thinnest frayed
end brushes
the tympanum and
bulge of water
which swells toward the wall
then ebbs
at the shore of the brain.
This strand —
which we think of
as the bass chord,
though its resonance
is less than that —
this strand is all
that connects
him to the round
syllable
that is his name.
It's what I imagine
prayer must be —
Church the hollow
cavern, the sounding
room
in the head of God,
and liturgy
a muffled sibilance
until inter-
cession. Faith,
like the tiny metal
tubes, mere mica
flecks in the doctor's
palm,
works its miracle
by engineering:
the wedge placed

between mucosum
  and drum
opens a seam
  in the rock that is
the skull,
  and the plaints
and singing
  are let in.

PATOIS

— Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris

What led us here was more accident than prayer,
Though a wind that could have been a prayer kept paging

Through the missal left at the base of the Haitian
Seer's stone. We had been looking for Proust

And Colette in this quadrant of sepulchres
When a sound like sea-surge, a moan of surf,

Began. It was the wind, we thought, which
Having no trees to claw, or water or grasses

To record its passing, had devised a keening
Against the corner monuments.

There was the sound of the drowned in it, a spray
Of foreign voices abandoned in the air

Between the lowering sky and marble doves, a not-quite
French that rose and lowered in the sea-salt

Cadenced forever, forever. Then it was done. The knot
Of worshippers undid itself and stepped out

Of the circle of fire the plastic flowers made
And the singing stopped. We became more

Northern then, following the white clouds of our
Breath back to the metro, away from the stones

And the dark vortex of that island song. When birds
Lift from the pediments it must be like that:

The earth's magnetic field tugging at the trace metal
In their skulls, drawing them through

The migratory arc from sea to land
Like a Carib priest summoning his voodoo back.

FURLOUGH

The day's late enough you can walk
Almost anonymous, unseen
Except for the white of your scarf
Which holds the light for a moment,
A second's worth of white, not long
Enough to make somebody stop
Though the mind is briefly troubled —
Don't I know you, weren't you — before
Dusk grows large and the scarf winks out.
This is the hour the stores close
And people hurry toward their homes,
A good hour for walking in
Near-night under civilian skies.
Not in the city, but the town
That preceded it, where cyclone
Fences line the quadrangle with
Its one soldier statue and lime-
Stone municipal hall, a line
Back to personal history,
Back to a place specifically
American — you're alone, but
With memory like a bright porch
At the end of a date, trees dark
Against the garage and curfew
Signalled by a twitch at the blinds.
Some distant car guns away then
And that is the moment you lock
Into, before the step onto
The porch into the collective
Dream. The horizon wells from there,
A bluish future which unbuilds
As you look at it, so you don't
Look. To pause on the sidewalk is
Enough, because you're awake a
Little, and a little asleep.

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